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COWPER

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THE TASK.

BOOK. IV.

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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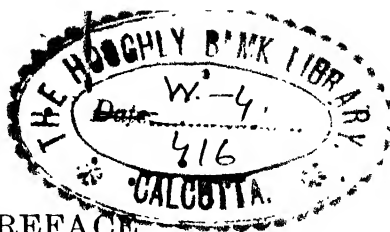
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## PREFACE.

A CAREFUL study of the *Letters* of Cowper is incumbent upon any Editor of his poetical works. For his *Letters* mirror the whole man, and hence I have not hesitated to quote from them freely both in my Notes and Introduction. I have prefixed to the Text an Argument of my own, as being fuller and therefore more useful to the student than the one that Cowper prepared. I wish generally to express my indebtedness for several illustrations contained in my Notes to Mr. Storr's edition of the *Task* in the English School Classics, and to Mr. Hales's edition of the first and the fourth Books. For much that is valuable in my Introduction my grateful acknowledgments are due to the Rev. H. T. Griffith's excellent "Introduction" and "Life of Cowper" in Vols. I. and II. of Cowper's Poems in the Clarendon Press Series. I have also gathered a few hints for this part of my subject from Mr. Goldwin Smith's *Cowper* in the "English Men of Letters" Series. The Text that I have adopted is mainly that of the Aldine edition.

W. T. W.



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## INTRODUCTION.

WILLIAM COWPER was born on the 15th of November Cowper's 1  
(Old Style), 1731, at Great Berkhamstead, in Hertfordshire—a parish of which his father was rector. His mother was a Donne, of the same family as the poet of that name, and descended by several lines from Henry III. She died when Cowper was six years old, and he was sent to a boarding-school. In 1741 he was entered at Westminster School, which he left at eighteen. He was soon after articled to an attorney in London, in whose office Thurlow, the future Lord Chancellor, was his fellow-clerk. In 1752 he took chambers in the Temple, and in 1754 was called to the Bar. During these years much of his time was spent at the house of his uncle, Ashley Cowper, with his daughters, Harriet (afterwards Lady Hesketh) and Theodora Jane, with whom he fell in love, and who is the "Delia" of his early love-poems. He gave his time to literature and the society of the wits of the "Nonsense Club" rather than to law, and renewed his connexion with his old school-fellows, Churchill, Colman, Lloyd, and Thornton. In 1763 he received the nomination to the office of Clerk of the Journals

of the House of Lords, but visions of opposition to the appointment, and fears of his own incapacity so wrought upon a mind already weakened by an attack of melancholy arising from his lonely surroundings, that he went mad and attempted suicide, his madness taking the form of religious despair. After eighteen months in Dr. Cotton's private asylum at St. Albans he recovered, and in 1765 was placed by his relatives at Huntingdon. Here he met the Unwin family, with whom he lived for the next two years. On the death of Mr. Unwin, senior, he accompanied Mrs. Unwin (the "Mary" of his *Letters* and poetry) to Olney, in Buckinghamshire, on the river Ouse, where he came under the influence of the Rev. John Newton, curate of the town. In 1773 his old malady again overtook him and he again attempted self-destruction. After his recovery he diverted his mind with gardening—a favourite pursuit—with carpentering, and with drawing; and found amusement in keeping three tame hares. In 1780 a period of literary activity began, and at Mrs. Unwin's suggestion he produced *The Progress of Error*, with the other Moral Satires, which were published in March, 1782. Meanwhile, in 1781, Cowper formed the acquaintance of Lady Austen, who subsequently came to live at Olney, and who inspired the *Task* as well as *John Gilpin*. Before the publication of the *Task* a rupture took place between her and the poet, and in May, 1784, she finally left Olney. At this time he became intimate with the Throckmortons, and in the same year he began his translation of Homer, which was finished in September, 1790. In 1783 Lady Hesketh paid him a visit, and by her

care he and Mrs. Unwin were transferred to Weston Underwood, a neighbouring place. Here Mrs. Unwin's health began to fail, and the poet again sank into the depths of hypochondria, which necessitated their removal in 1796 to East Dereham, in Norfolk, where soon after Mrs. Unwin died. Mentally shattered, Cowper survived her three years and a half, and died very peacefully on April 25th, 1800, and was buried in Dereham Church.

Cowper lived in stirring times, the events of which HIS TIMES. he viewed with interest "through the loopholes of retreat" by means of that "map of busy life," the newspaper. When he was fourteen years of age occurred The Young Pretender. the invasion of the Young Pretender, in 1745, his victory over Sir John Cope at Prestonpans, and his final defeat at Culloden in 1746.

During the first fifty years of Cowper's life England Wars with France, Spain, and America. was almost continually at war with France or Spain or both together. The War of the Austrian Succession led to hostilities with France in 1744, and, in 1759, the capture of Quebec by Wolfe made Canada a British possession. In 1762, in consequence of the Family Compact, war was declared against Spain, which was followed by the Peace of Paris in 1763. In 1775 the American War began—the result of an attempt to impose import duties on the British Colonies in North America. The battles of Lexington and Bunker's Hill in 1775 were followed by the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, and in the following year, under the Convention of Saratoga, General Burgoyne surrendered to the American General Gates. This was the turning-point of the war, and France, in

1778, and Spain, in 1779, entered into an alliance with the American States; while in 1780 England, in self-defence, declared war against Holland—a year that was marked by Rodney's famous victory over the Spanish fleet off Cape St. Vincent. The same year saw all the powers of Europe arrayed against Britain under the "Armed Neutrality" compact, which claimed that a neutral flag should protect all cargoes. In 1781 Cornwallis's capitulation at York Town resulted in the acknowledgment of the independence of the United States in 1782; and in 1783 the Peace of Versailles was concluded with France and Spain.

affairs. In Cowper's life-time too occurred the commencement and consolidation of our Indian Empire. In 1751 Clive captured Arcot from the French, and in 1757 won the battle of Plassy. In 1765 by the Treaty of Allahabad the revenues of Bengal, Behar, and Orissa were ceded to the East India Company. Warren Hastings became Governor of Bengal in 1772, and in 1774 Governor-General of British India. In 1779 Sir Eyre Coote defeated Haidar Ali and his Mahratta kordes at Porto Novo, and again at Polliore. The younger Pitt's East India Bill, erecting a Board of Control over the Company's administration, was passed in 1784; and in 1785 Hastings returned to England, was impeached in 1788 before the House of Lords, and at length acquitted in 1795.

ver's view  
r Indian  
nistra-

It has been shown in the notes to lines 30 and 681, that Cowper refers with some frequency both in his poems and in his letters, to the Company's administration in India, and always in terms of reproach and

condemnation. England is invariably regarded as the oppressor, and India as the victim. What are the grounds for this belief, which was generally diffused in Cowper's time, and which we find crystallized in his works? Macaulay, in his Essay on Clive, attributes the great unpopularity of his hero, on his final return to England in 1767, to the fact that he was reckoned by his countrymen as eminent among that new class of Englishmen which the great events that had taken place in India had called into existence—the so-called “Nabobs.” These unfortunate Nabobs, sprung from obscurity, the possessors of great wealth which they “exhibited insolently and spent extravagantly,” excited among the English people a “bitter aversion, the effect of mingled envy and contempt.” Their immense fortunes, it was rumoured, had been accumulated “by violating public faith, by deposing legitimate princes, by reducing whole provinces to beggary. A tempest of execration and derision, such as can be compared only to that outbreak of public feeling against the Puritans which took place at the time of the Restoration, burst on the servants of the Company.” The literary men of the day combined against them. “Writers, the most unlike in sentiment and style, Methodists and libertines, philosophers and buffoons, were for once on the same side.” And as one of the most prominent of these writers Macaulay designates Cowper. For he continues: “Cowper, in that lofty expostulation which glows with the very spirit of the Hebrew poets, placed the oppression of India foremost in the list of those national crimes for which God had punished England with years of dis-

Its grounds  
(a) The “Na  
bobs.”

astrous war, with discomfiture in her own seas, and with the loss of her transatlantic empire.”<sup>1</sup>

But if the unpopularity of the Nabobs in Cowper’s day led to the misrepresentation of England’s dealings with India in the person of the Company’s officers, and to the exaggeration or invention of their misdeeds, a much more powerful reason for this general feeling was, as Sir Henry Maine has pointed out, the fact that English classical literature towards the end of the last century was “saturated with party politics.” “This,” he continues, “would have been a less serious fact if, at this epoch, one chief topic of the great writers and rhetoricians, of Burke and Sheridan, of Fox and Francis, had not been India itself. ... We are only now beginning to see how excessively inaccurate were their statements of fact and how one-sided were their judgments.” And in his work entitled *The Reign of Queen Victoria*, ‘India,’ Sir John Strachey, commenting upon these remarks of Sir Henry Maine, says: “Since the earlier part of the present century the old stories of the crimes by which the establishment of our power in India was attended have been passed on from one author to another. ... These calumnies have caused and are still causing no little mischief both in England and India. Thousands of excellent people are filled with righteous indignation when they read of the atrocious acts of Clive and Hastings, the judicial murder of Nandkumar, the extermination of the Rohillas, the plunder of the Begums. No suspicion of the truth reaches them that these horrors never occurred.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Expostulation*, 364-375.

The above comments and quotations are sufficient to explain Cowper's attitude in regard to the doings of a mercantile corporation primarily concerned in making money. In the words of Mr. Deighton,<sup>1</sup> "The fierce light that beats upon a modern administration was unknown to the Honourable East India Company. Its servants thought little of posterity, cared nothing that the history they were making should, on its translation into narrative, be ordered and marshalled with the stately precision by which a more self-conscious regime guards itself against detraction and misunderstanding." But with the fuller information afforded us by such writers as Sir John Strachey and Sir Alfred Lyall, by Sir James Stephen's examination of the Nandkumar myth and the impeachment of Impey, and by the selections from Official Records edited by Professor Forrest, we are enabled to view its acts in a far different light from that in which they appeared to Cowper and his contemporaries.

Another stirring event of Cowper's day was the "No-Popery Riots." In 1778 a Bill was passed to relieve the Roman Catholics of the worst of their civil disabilities. Popular riots followed in Scotland, and in 1780 Lord George Gordon convened a monster meeting of Protestants in St. George's Fields, who marched to the House of Commons and burst into the lobby. For four days, owing to the want of energy shown by the authorities, London was at the mercy of the mob, who burned down not fewer than

<sup>1</sup> Preface to his edition of Macaulay's *Warren Hastings*, to which I am also indebted for the extracts from Maine and Strachey given above.



72 private houses, with four or five strong gaols. Gordon was tried on a charge of high treason, and acquitted in 1731.

Of the social and political life of England in Cowper's day—or rather that of which he had experience as a young man—a modern writer has given a gloomy picture. It was a world from which the spirit of poetry seemed to have fled. Spiritual religion was almost extinct. The Church was little better than a political force. The clergy were idle and neglectful of their duties, often sordid and corrupt,<sup>1</sup> fanatics in their Toryism, and cold, rationalistic, and almost heathen in their preachings. The society of the day was one of hard and heartless polish and fashionable immorality, devoted to a giddy round of theatre-going, card-parties, and balls.<sup>2</sup> Among the common people religion was almost extinct. Ignorance and brutality reigned in the cottage. Drunkenness and profanity reigned in palace and cottage alike. In a letter of 1785 to Newton, Cowper writes: "Heathenish parents can only bring up heathenish children; an assertion nowhere oftener or more clearly illustrated than at Olney, where children, seven years of age, infest the streets every evening with curses and with songs to which it would be unseemly to give their proper epithet." Gambling, cock-fighting, and bull-baiting were the amusements of the people. Political life was corrupt from the top of the scale to the bottom. Society was intensely aristocratic; no duties towards the lower classes were acknowledged; and each rank was divided from that below it by a sharp line, which precluded

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ll. 595-612.    <sup>2</sup> Cf. Ll. 42-45, 144-149, 195-231.

brotherhood or sympathy. Of humanity there was as little as there was of religion. It was the age of the criminal law which hanged men for petty thefts, of lifelong imprisonment for debt, of the unreformed prison system, and of the press-gang. That the slave-trade was iniquitous hardly any one suspected.<sup>1</sup>

But a change was at hand, and two revivals—one, <sup>Revival of Poetry.</sup> literary, and the other, religious—were in progress, in both of which Cowper took no inconsiderable part. It is to him chiefly, along with Thomson, Gray, and Crabbe, that we owe that great revolution in popular taste and sentiment which substituted the “romantic” for the “classical” type in literature—a revolution which was ushered in by the publication in 1765 of Bishop Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. In Cowper’s writings a simple and natural, almost colloquial, style takes the place of that pompous and artificial style which Pope had brought into favour; and he is one of the leaders in the reaction from the hard conventionalism and cold, unreal sentiment of the Queen Anne school of poetry, to the picturesque freshness and genuine human feeling which was to attain a yet nobler development in the hands of a Scott, a Shelley, and a Wordsworth.

With the religious revival of 1738, of which Whitefield and Wesley were the leaders, Cowper was even more in sympathy. <sup>Revival of Religion.</sup> It expressed a revolt from the religious deadness of the time, and its aim was to carry religion and morality to the masses of the population. But it did more than this; its action upon

<sup>1</sup> See Cowper, “English Men of Letters” Series; and compare Cowper’s own sketch in *Tirocinium*, 813-858.

the Church broke the lethargy of the clergy, till the fox-hunting parson and the absentee rector became at last impossible. A fresh moral enthusiasm arose in the nation at large, the profligacy of the 'upper classes gradually disappeared, and a new philanthropic impulse established Sunday schools, raised hospitals, sent John Howard on his visits to the prisons of England and Europe, supported Burke in his plea for the Hindoo, and Clarkson and Wilberforce in their crusade against the iniquity of the slave trade.<sup>1</sup> Of this moral and religious movement Cowper was the poetical exponent; and his indignant denunciations of national offences against piety and morality, with the intense religious feeling that animates his writings, mark him out from among the poets of his day, and indeed from among all other English poets.

Cowper's  
CHARACTER:  
1) His  
natural  
cheerful-  
ness.

Cowper was of an amiable and cheerful disposition, and his natural gaiety of temperament often shows itself in his poetry, and especially in his letters. The pessimism<sup>2</sup> with which he has been charged, seems to have been the outcome, partly of the hypochondria from which he constantly suffered,<sup>3</sup> and partly of his theology, which inculcated and emphasized the irretrievable corruption of human nature, ever pursued by the vengeance of an angry God.

<sup>1</sup> See Green's *History of the English People*, vol. iv., pp. 273-4.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Ll.* 576-579.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Letters, To Lady Hesketh*, Nov. 23, 1785: "I have, indeed, a most troublesome stomach, and which does not improve as I grow older"; and *To Newton*, Dec. 3, 1785: "Having been for some years troubled with an inconvenient stomach; and, lately, with a stomach that will digest nothing without help."

At the same time, Cowper is never unctuous, and though he sometimes indulges in a censorious tone of thought and expression, no trace of religious cant is to be found in his writings; the refined and delicate taste that is one of his most striking characteristics, governs, with hardly an exception, his frequent references to spiritual matters. Here and there, it is true, he betrays a fanatical antipathy to natural science,<sup>1</sup> and the Misagathus episode in the sixth book of the *Task*<sup>2</sup> savours somewhat of a religious intolerance which is characteristic of his creed rather than of his natural character.

But if his constitutional melancholy was partially the cause of his gloomy views of life, it was this same melancholy that drove him to poetical composition. "Dejection of spirits," he writes, "which I suppose may have prevented many a man from becoming an author, made me one. Manual occupations do not engage the mind sufficiently, as I know by experience, having tried many. But composition, especially of verse, absorbs it wholly."<sup>3</sup> And again, "Amusements are necessary in a retirement like mine, especially in such a state of mind as I labour under. The necessity of amusement makes me sometimes write verses; it made me a carpenter, a bird-cage maker, a gardener; and has lately taught me to draw."<sup>4</sup>

Another characteristic of Cowper was his excessive shyness, which has been already illustrated by his morbid shrinking from the Parliamentary clerkship,

<sup>1</sup> As in Bk. iii. 150-190.

<sup>2</sup> Ll. 483-559.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters, To Lady Hesketh*, Oct. 12, 1785.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib.*, *To Unwin*, April 6, 1780. See also *To Lady Hesketh*, Dec. 15, 1785; and cf. ll. 261-264.

and which led to a passionate love of retirement and seclusion.<sup>1</sup> He calls himself "naturally the shyest of mankind," and describes how at Olney he "lived the life of a solitary," unvisited by a single neighbour.<sup>2</sup> The visit of a stranger generally disconcerted him, and when he is told that a "lady of quality" awaits him in the parlour, "he feels his spirits sink ten degrees." And he concludes his account of the occurrence with "I am a shy animal, and want much kindness to make me easy. Such I shall be to my dying day."<sup>3</sup>

a tender-  
ness of dis-  
tinction.

Towards  
animals.

A natural concomitant of this shyness was a sympathetic tenderness of disposition, which was a perpetual protest against the hardness of the world around him, and which showed itself in his love for animals. Besides his hare, his spaniel, his goldfinches, and his cat, all of which his poetry has enshrined, at one time we find "eight pair of tame pigeons" waiting for their breakfast every morning from his hand;<sup>4</sup> and, at another, 'a pet linnet is let out of its cage, "to whisk about the room a little" and then be shut up again.<sup>5</sup> He kept, too, a tame mouse while he was a schoolboy at Westminster.<sup>6</sup> Very characteristic is a passage in one of his letters where, referring to his attachment to animals, he says: "All the notice that we lords of Creation vouchsafe to bestow on the creatures, is generally to abuse them; it is well therefore that here and there a man should be found a little womanish,

<sup>1</sup> See note to l. 799.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters, To Hurdis*, Aug. 9, 1791.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.*, *To Bagot*, Aug. 2, 1791.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib.*, *To Unwin*, Sept. 21, 1799:

<sup>5</sup> *Ib.*, *To Unwin*, Feb. 27, 1780.

<sup>6</sup> *Ib.*, *To Lady Hesketh*, Jan. 16, 1786.

or perhaps a little childish in this matter, who will make amends, by kissing, by coaxing, and laying them in one's bosom."<sup>1</sup> Some of his most exquisite lines are those in which he describes the innocent happiness of beast or bird that people his sylvan haunts,<sup>2</sup> and the verses in which he inculcates kindness to animals have become classical on that theme.<sup>3</sup> He cannot dismiss the subject of the waggoner plodding beside his load in winter, without a plea for the "poor beasts" that drag it—"Ah, treat them kindly!"<sup>4</sup>

This gentle sensibility showed itself too in his friendly attitude towards the poor and his sympathetic descriptions of their hardships and sorrows. His letters contain not a few compassionate references to the sufferings of the poverty-stricken lace-makers of Olney, and what a realistic and touching picture has he drawn in this Book<sup>5</sup> of the poor cottager's winter evening—each sad detail accurately worked in with unadorned directness. There is a world of simple pathos in the single line I have italicized—

"The taper soon extinguished, which I saw •

*Dangled along at the cold finger's end*

• Just when the day declined."

Lastly, Cowper was pre-eminently a lover of Nature. (f) His love of Nature. Slighted as it was in his day, "the country," he writes, "wins me still";<sup>6</sup> and the only poets that could please him in his youth were those

"whose lyre was tuned

To Nature's praises"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To *Hurdis*, June 13, 1791.

<sup>2</sup> Bk. vi. 305 *et seq.*

<sup>3</sup> Bk. vi. 560 *et seq.*

<sup>4</sup> Ll. 370 *et seq.*; see also ll. 147, 148.

<sup>5</sup> Ll. 374-398.

<sup>6</sup> L. 694; see note there.

<sup>7</sup> Ll. 704, 5.

The tender care with which he has studied her varied effects is sufficient proof of the love he felt for her, illustrated as it is so frequently and exquisitely in his verse. Take for instance his description of the play of light and shade under the "graceful arch" of an avenue of trees:—

" Beneath

The chequered earth seems restless as a flood  
Brushed by the wind. So sportive is the light  
Shot through the boughs, it dances as they dance,  
Shadow and sunshine intermingling quick,  
And darkening and enlightening, as the leaves  
Play wanton, every moment, every spot."<sup>1</sup>

Or, if we pass to his enumeration of the plants in a greenhouse, how picturesquely accurate are the epithets he employs, and with what loving delight does he linger over the picture:—

"The spiry myrtle with unwithering leaf  
Shines there, and flourishes. The golden boast  
Of Portugal and Western India there,  
The ruddier orange and the paler lime,  
Peep through their polished foliage at the storm,  
And seem to smile at what they need not fear.  
The amomum there with intermingling flowers  
And cherries hangs in twigs. Geranium boasts  
Her crimson honours; and the spangled bean,  
Ficoides, glitters bright the winter long."<sup>2</sup>

(1) He prefers  
well-ordered  
Nature.

As has been said of Tennyson, so it is true of Cowper, that the Nature he loved was of the well-ordered and well-regulated kind, rather than the Nature of mountains and rocks and shaggy forests. He delights in the trim avenue, the carefully-tended garden, the shel-

<sup>1</sup> Bk. i. 343-349.

<sup>2</sup> Bk. iii. 570-579.

tered walk, the Wilderness with its "well-rolled" paths. Writing of his visit to Hayley at Eartham, near Chichester, he says: "The cultivated appearance of Weston suits my frame of mind far better than wild hills that aspire to be mountains, covered with vast unfrequented woods, and here and there affording a peep between their summits at the distant ocean. Within doors all was hospitality and kindness, but the scenery *would* have its effect; and though delightful in the extreme to those who had spirits to bear it, was too gloomy for me."<sup>1</sup>

Though Cowper, like Wordsworth, was a reverent student of Nature's lore, he never thought, like him, of idealizing her as a power that may enable us to "see into the life of things," and of listening for her hidden voices. He depicts her outward features with loving fidelity, but sees no soul behind them. The only spiritual significance Nature has for him is that she affords a proof of the wisdom and goodness of the Creator. At the same time he approaches nearer to Wordsworth's idealism than such a writer as Thomson did, who merely reproduces her picturesque effects. He can contemplate her as a whole, and in one passage at least in his poetry we find a flash of still profounder imaginative insight. For the solitary man, he tells us, not only animals but shrubs and trees have speech, easy to be understood, and then follows this couplet—

"After long drought, when rains abundant fall,  
He hears the herbs and flowers rejoicing all,"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Letters, To Newton*, Oct. 18, 1792. See also *Ib., To Lady Hesketh*, Sept. 9, 1792.

<sup>2</sup> *The Needless Alarm*, 59, 60.

(2) His view of Nature differs from Wordsworth's.



the latter line of which almost startlingly reminds us of the great poet of Nature.

The TASK :  
(a) Its origin  
and motto.

The *Task* was commenced in the summer of 1783; finished, revised, and transcribed in the autumn of 1784; and published, along with *Tirocinium* and *John Gilpin*, in July, 1785. Cowper has told us how it originated. Pressed by Lady Austen to write a new poem in blank verse, Cowper replied "I will, if you will give me a subject." "Oh," said she, "you can write on any subject; write on this sofa." Hence *The Sofa* became the title of the first book, while the whole poem, as being a task imposed upon him by his lady friend, was called *The Task*.<sup>1</sup> Its motto, *Fit surculus arbor* ('the twig becomes a tree') points to the fact that the poet (with the sofa for a subject) "having much leisure, connected another subject with it; and pursuing the train of thought to which his situation and turn of mind led him, brought forth at length, instead of the trifle which he at first intended, a serious affair—a volume."<sup>2</sup> Cowper tells us that this motto was "taken by a certain prince of Orange, in the year 1733, ... as I think, to a medal," but confesses himself unable to name its author.<sup>3</sup>

(b) Its object. As to the object of the poem—"My principal purpose," Cowper writes, "is to allure the reader, by character, by scenery, by imagery, and such poetical embellishments, to the reading of what may profit him. Subordinately to this, to combat that predilection in favour of a metropolis, that beggars and ex-

<sup>1</sup> *Letters, To Newton*, Dec. 11, 1784.

<sup>2</sup> Cowper's *Advertisement* to the poem.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters, To Unwin*, Oct. 2, 1784.

hausts the country, by evacuating it of all its principal inhabitants : and collaterally, and as far as is consistent with this double intention, to have a stroke at vice, vanity, and folly, wherever I find them.”<sup>1</sup>

The poet claims to have “laboured much in the arrangement of his matter, and to have given to the several parts of every book that sort of slight connexion which poetry demands.”<sup>2</sup> But, sooth to say, if there is no confusion, there is an entire absence of design, or of any preconceived plan whatever ; and the poet, commencing in a mock-heroic strain, which, however, he soon drops, rambles through a vast variety of subjects—moral, religious, political, social, philosophical, and rural. “Nothing can exceed the ease, the simplicity, the genuine courtesy, the kindly garrulity, with which he converses with all who are willing to walk by his side ; and helps them to draw from the scenes he loves the pleasure which they impart to himself, and to share with him the emotions and reflections which they stir up in his own mind.”<sup>3</sup> This want of method doubtless contributed not a little to the great success of the poem. The medley of satire and description, humour and pathos, gentle irony and personal touches, delighted readers to whose taste the hard didacticism of the *Moral Satires* had failed to appeal ; and few of them regretted that he had gone on “roving as he roved” so charmingly, and painted

“every idle thing

That fancy finds in her excursive flights.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Letters, To Newton*, Nov. 27, 1784.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.*, *To Lady Hesketh*, July 28, 1788.

<sup>3</sup> *Cowper* (Clarendon Press Series), vol. ii., p. xxxiv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ll.* 241, 242.

d) Its moral :  
the praise of  
retirement  
and country  
life.

Amidst this variety of topics there are two to which the writer perpetually recurs, and which form the moral, as it were, of the *Task*—the praise of retirement and of country life. He is the poet of home and the domestic hearth. He is supremely contented “in the low vale of life,”<sup>1</sup> delighting in the thought that he is at “a safe distance” from the “great Babel”<sup>2</sup> of the outer world. “I am,” he writes to Thomas Park,<sup>3</sup> “as you say, a hermit, and probably an irreclaimable one, having a horror of London that I cannot express, nor indeed very easily account for.” Hence the heartfelt enjoyment with which he paints the pleasures of the country as opposed to those of the town, of “fireside enjoyments, homeborn happiness,”<sup>4</sup> as opposed to the theatre, the rout, and the card-party; together with the unwarrantable assumption which runs all through his writings, that a life of retirement is more favourable to virtue than a life of action.<sup>5</sup> Hence too that strain of idealism which led him to regard the country as the abode of innocence till it was corrupted by the vices of the city,<sup>6</sup> as well as his sweeping condemnation of corporate bodies as unnatural combinations out of which no good thing could come.<sup>7</sup> With what a simple, almost naive, satisfaction does he picture the “intimate delights” of the winter evening—the snug parlour, the close-drawn curtains shutting out the “freezing blast,” the bubbling

<sup>1</sup> L. 779; cf. note.    <sup>2</sup> Ll. 93, 90.    <sup>3</sup> May 17, 1793.    <sup>4</sup> L. 140.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Milton's well-known words: “I cannot praise a fugitive or cloistered virtue; assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, but impurity much rather; that which purifies as is trial, and trial is by what is contrary.”

<sup>6</sup> Ll. 553 *et seq.*, 623 *et seq.*

<sup>7</sup> L. 659 *et seq.*

and hissing tea-kettle, the happy group round the fire; the needle "plying its busy task" to the accompaniment of the book read aloud or the song sung to the guitar, the modest supper, and the social converse with which the evening ends!<sup>1</sup> And, as he adds every fresh touch, we follow his delineation with growing interest and sympathy, till we find ourselves ready to re-echo his enthusiasm when he triumphantly asks at the close

"Is winter hideous in a garb like this?"<sup>2</sup>

Of satire there is a good deal in the *Task*, and Cowper tells us his object in introducing it. "In some passages," he writes, "you will observe me very satirical. Writing on such subjects I could not be otherwise. I can write nothing without aiming at least at usefulness: it were beneath my years to do it, and still more dishonourable to my religion. I know that a reformation of such abuses as I have censured is not to be expected from the efforts of a poet; but to contemplate the world, its follies, its vices, its indifference to duty, and its strenuous attachment to what is evil, and not to reprehend, were to approve it. From this charge at least I shall be clear."<sup>(e)</sup>

(e) Its satire :  
(1) Why introduced.

But if Cowper was satirical from a sense of duty, there is no doubt that, with his love of humour and gentle persiflage, he thoroughly enjoyed writing in that vein. There is nothing forced in his satire, which is of that graceful and polished kind of which Horace's satire is the type. Where Cowper falls short is in knowledge of his subject, which, combined with his religious asceticism, led him sometimes to denounce amusements

(2) Natural and polished, but ill-informed.

<sup>1</sup> Ll. 35 et seq., 158 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> L. 194.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters*, To Unwin, Oct. 10, 1784.

which we now justly deem innocent. What he knew or thought he knew of society and the gay world is drawn either from his youthful experiences as a Templar in London, or from newspapers and books. We have his own confession on this point. Referring in one of his letters<sup>1</sup> to Knox's Essays, a book he was then reading, he says: "Writing chiefly on the manners, vices, and follies of the modern day, to me he (Knox) is at least so far useful, as that he gives me information upon points concerning which I neither *can* nor *would* be informed except by hearsay. Of such information, however, I have need, being a writer upon those subjects myself, and a satirical writer too. It is fit, therefore, in order that I may find fault in the right place, that I should know where fault may properly be found." Society was thus to him for the most part an abstraction, and his somewhat antiquated sources of information prevented him from taking into account, in his strictures, the great moral and religious improvement already referred to, which was taking place in his day.

(3) Why successful.  
Cowper's gifts of insight and humour.

The high degree of success to which, notwithstanding, Cowper's satire attains, is due to his gift of insight into the motives and feelings of others, to his ready wit in making vice or folly ridiculous, and to the sly and delicate humour of which he is so consummate a master. When—to take a single instance—in attacking the stage, he sneers at

"the smart  
And snappish dialogue that flippant wits  
Call comedy,"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To Newton, Oct. 30, 1784.

<sup>2</sup> Ll. 197-199.

we think of Sheridan and his sparkling repartee, and wonder whether our critic has ever read the *School for Scandal*. But when he proceeds—

“The self-complacent actor, when he views  
(Stealing a sidelong glance at a full house)  
The slope of faces from the floor to the roof  
(As if one master spring controlled them all)  
Relaxed into an universal grin,”

we feel that the delicious drollery of the picture is irresistible, and, once more in sympathy with our author, we laugh with him at the actor and his audience.

It should be remarked that Cowper's satire has none of the venom or the personality of Pope and his school. It has point but not sting. So far, indeed, is he from being personal, that his geniality of temperament often leads him to pardon in the individual what he condemns in the abstract. Thus, though strongly objecting to tobacco-smoking, he is indulgent to the practice in the case of his friends Newton and Bull,<sup>1</sup> and he turns aside from his wholesale denunciations of English oppression in India to assure Warren Hastings, in verses addressed to his old schoolfellow, that he cannot believe him to be “grown a villain and the worst of men.”

Among the chief qualities of Cowper's style, the most remarkable, perhaps is its Simplicity. His acknowledged aim was not to court popularity but to do good, and accordingly he delivers his message with a sincere directness that goes straight to the point. He has an abhorrence of affectation of any kind, and is filled with too much earnestness of purpose to leave room for any air of pretentiousness or mysticism. In

(4) Not venomous or personal.

Cowper's style:  
(a) Its Simplicity;

<sup>1</sup> See note to l. 472.

his language he is plain and outspoken but never coarse; and it is this genuineness of the man that invests his writings with moral dignity as well as with literary excellence.

ough some-  
times long-  
worded and  
Latinized;  
races of arti-  
ciality and  
commonplace.

In one point, however, he falls short of his usual simplicity—in his fondness for long, Latin derivatives such as (in this Book) *congregated* (l. 344), *consolidated* (l. 349), *ebriety* (l. 460), *tramontane* (l. 533), *supplemental* (l. 769). These and others like them we can set down to the scholar's predilection for classical expressions, and still more to the taste for a Latinized style that was so common in Cowper's time under the literary influence of Dr. Johnson; but when we meet with such mouth-filling polysyllables as *vortiginous* (ii. 102), *oscitancy* (ii. 774), and *stercoraceous* (iii. 463), we are more puzzled, and half wonder whether our author is not making fun of his readers. Cowper also, like Milton, not infrequently uses words in their primitive Latin sense, as *expatiate* (l. 107) and *resulting* (v. 802); and though he is for the most part emancipated from the conventional style of the Artificial School, we find occasional traces of it in his writings, as in his use, for instance, of "levelled tube"<sup>1</sup> for "gun," which is Pope all over.<sup>2</sup> Occasionally, too, his simplicity degenerates into commonplace, especially when he is moralizing, and he descends into such metrical prose as the following:—

"Arms, through the vanity and brainless rage  
Of these that bear them, in whatever cause,  
Seem most at variance with all moral good,  
And incompatible with serious thought."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Hope*, 350.

<sup>2</sup> See also notes to ll. 20, 165, 391.

<sup>3</sup> Ll. 619-622.

The next quality is Perspicuity. Cowper is as clear<sup>(b)</sup> and distinct in his thoughts as he is in their expression. His language and his conceptions are so free from ambiguities that we are never at a loss for his meaning. He enunciates his own views on this point in his advice to a young kinsman of his who had ventured on a poem: "Remember that, in writing, perspicuity is always more than half the battle. The want of it is the ruin of more than half the poetry that is published. A meaning that does not stare you in the face is as bad as no meaning, because nobody will take the pains to poke for it."<sup>1</sup> This statement of the case is perhaps somewhat too sweeping; but the fact remains that Cowper followed this principle in his own practice, and this transparency of style is one of the qualities that make his *Task* so admirable as a school-book.

Another quality that Cowper claims for himself is Originality. "I reckon it," he writes, "among my principal advantages, as a composer of verses, that I have not read an English poet these thirteen years, and but one these twenty years. Imitation, even of the best models, is my aversion; it is servile and mechanical, a trick that has enabled many to usurp the name of author, who could not have written at all, if they had not written upon the pattern of somebody indeed original."<sup>2</sup> And again: "My delineations of the heart are from my own experience; not one of them borrowed from books, or in the least degree conjectural. In my numbers ... I have imi-

<sup>1</sup> *Letters, To John Johnson, Feb. 28, 1790.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ib., To Unwin, Nov. 24, 1781.*



tated nobody, though sometimes perhaps there may be an apparent 'resemblance; because at the same time that I would not imitate, I have not affectedly differed."<sup>1</sup> That Cowper has made good this claim may well be conceded; he had too much independence of character to become a copyist of others. At the same time there are obvious reminiscences of Pope in the *Moral Satires*; and in the *Task*, both as regards rhythm and phraseology, he is to some extent indebted to Milton.<sup>2</sup> He owes still more to the influence of Thomson, one of the leaders in the return from conventionalism to nature, whom he himself characterizes as "admirable in description" and as "a true poet."<sup>3</sup>

(a) Its Descriptive Power.

We pass on to Cowper's wonderful Descriptive Power. Such is the sensibility of his mind that every detail of a scene is mirrored upon it with the minutest fidelity, as upon the sensitive plate of a photographic camera. In this power he reminds us of Homer; and the secret of it is that he describes what he knows and has seen with his own eyes. The poets of the Pope school never really studied nature for themselves, and so were compelled to piece out their descriptions with stock epithets and artificial phrases. "My descriptions," writes Cowper, and he writes truly, "are all from nature: not one of them second-handed."<sup>4</sup> Hence we find in them an absence of vagueness, of loose and inaccurate generalities; and, instead, that almost scientific ac-

<sup>1</sup> *Letters, To Unwin*, Oct. 10, 1784.

<sup>2</sup> See note to l. 709.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters, To Mrs. King*, June 19, 1788.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib., To Unwin*, Oct. 10, 1784.

curacy which is so marked a feature in the modern style of poetry.<sup>1</sup> If, when he moralizes, he is sometimes commonplace, he is never so when he describes; and it is to the wonderful skill and consummate truth of his pictures, whether of nature or of humanity, more than to anything else that he owes his high rank among English poets. The description of the woodman and his dog in "The Winter Morning Walk"<sup>2</sup> is an admirable example of this pictorial power. Note especially the lines—

"His dog attends him. Close behind his heel  
Now creeps he slow; and now with many a frisk  
Wide scampering, snatches up the drifted snow  
With ivory teeth, or ploughs it with his snout;  
Then shakes his powdered coat, and barks for joy."

Other instances, in this Book, are his delineation of the waggoner and his team,<sup>3</sup> and of the poor cottager's family on a winter evening,<sup>4</sup> and of the dairy-maid turned fine lady.<sup>5</sup> The well-known passage on Evening<sup>6</sup> is a specimen of more imaginative and distinctly poetical description.

We may notice finally Cowper's Subjectivity. He is himself a part of what he tells, and the fact that the *Task* is full of the poet himself forms one of its special charms. These personal touches are introduced so naively and naturally into his verse, that it never occurs to us to charge him with vanity or self-consciousness. He seems to take his readers into his confidence, as if they were his personal friends, and

(2) Its Subjectivity.

<sup>1</sup> See W. J. Dawson's *Makers of Modern English*, pp. 12, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ll. 41-57.

<sup>3</sup> Ll. 341-356.

<sup>4</sup> Ll. 380-402.

<sup>5</sup> Ll. 540-552.

<sup>6</sup> Ll. 243-253.

to wish them to 'share in and sympathize with his thoughts and feelings, his likes and dislikes, his hopes and fears. The *Task* indeed is in a great part made up of his own doings and experiences; and from the materials to be found in this one poem it would not be difficult to build up an instructive sketch of the author's life and character.

Conclusion. The *Task* succeeded beyond Cowper's utmost expectations,<sup>1</sup> and was read and admired by everybody. Its fame travelled to America, and it was reprinted in New York.<sup>2</sup> He himself was inclined to set a higher value upon his earlier volume,<sup>3</sup> and especially upon his *Homer*;<sup>4</sup> but it is upon his *Task*, with some of his lyrics, that his fame rests, and few of its readers will not re-echo the words of Lamb: "I have been reading 'The Task' with fresh delight. I am glad you love Cowper. I could forgive a man for not enjoying Milton; but I would not call that man my friend who should be offended with the 'divine chit-chat of Cowper.'"<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Letters, To Lady Hesketh*, March 20, 1786.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.*, *To Dr. Cogswell*, June 15, 1791.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.*, *To Lady Hesketh*, May 18, 1791.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib.*, *To John Johnson*, Nov. 5, 1792.

<sup>5</sup> *Ib.*, *To Coleridge*, Dec. 5, 1796. The phrase quoted is Coleridge's.





## THE TASK.

BOOK IV.—THE WINTER EVENING.

## ARGUMENT.

The post comes in; the postman and his budget described; the newspaper is eagerly opened and read, 1-35—Evening by the snug fireside; the contents of the newspaper delineated under the image of a map, 36-87—The world and its concerns as contemplated by the recluse through the medium of newspapers and books of travel, 88-119—Address to Winter personified; how the winter evening is spent by the poet's household: not in fashionable routs, but in needle-work, reading aloud, music, a plain supper, and religious conversation, 120-193—A contrasted sketch of worldly amusements: the theatre, card-playing, gunbling, billiards, 194-242—The subject resumed; address to Evening personified, 243-266—A brogue study; images of the fancy seen in the fire; meanwhile the snow falls silently outside and changes the face of nature, 267-332—The hardships of those who have to be abroad; the waggoner, 333-373—Description of a poor but honest household, too proud to beg for parish relief, which is given to others who less deserve it; Mr. Smith's bounty, 374-428—The rural thief, who robs gardens and hen-roosts, not to provide for his family but to indulge his habits of drinking, 429-465—The multiplication of public-houses, which are the schools of vice for the lower classes; it is the interest of the Government to encourage drunkenness, since it enriches the revenue, 466-512—The old ideal of pastoral simplicity is lost; sketch of the farmer's daughter as she was once and as she is now, 513-552—The town has corrupted the country, which now has its housebreakers and highwaymen; the spread of luxury and profusion; the higher classes mostly desert the country for town, and those who remain and act as magistrates are either glothful, timid, or open to bribery, 553-612—But the militia is most in fault; the innocent rustic is enlisted, drilled, and at length transformed into a soldier, only to return, after his three years' service, discontented and corrupt, 613-658—The evils of bodies corporate is illustrated by boroughs, trading companies and the army, 659-690—But, though thus contaminated, the country delights me still, as in my boyhood, when those poets of rural scenes, Virgil, Milton, and Cowley, were my favourites; the love of nature is born with all, as is shown by the prevalence of suburban villas, town gardens, and window gardens, 691-779—Some men are fitted for public offices and affairs; my wish is for rural ease and leisure, 780-801.

# THE TASK. .

## BOOK IV.

### THE WINTER EVENING.

HARK ! 'tis the twanging horn ! O'er yonder bridge,  
That with its wearisome but needful length  
Bestrides the wintry flood, in which the noon  
Sees her unwrinkled face reflected bright,  
He comes, the herald of a noisy world,  
With spattered boots, strapped waist, and frozen locks,  
News from all nations lumbering at his back.  
True to his charge, the close-packed load behind,  
Yet careless what he brings, his one concern  
Is to conduct it to the destined inn, 10  
And having dropped the expected bag—purs on.  
He whistles as he goes, light-hearted wretch,  
Cold and yet cheerful : messenger of grief  
Perhaps to thousands, and of joy to some,  
To him indifferent whether grief or joy.  
Houses in ashes, and the fall of stocks,  
Births, deaths, and marriages, epistles wet  
With tears that trickled down the writer's cheeks  
Fast as the periods from his fluent quill,  
Or charged with amorous sighs of absent swains, 20  
Or nymphs responsive, equally affect  
His horse and him, unconscious of them all :  
But oh the important budget, ushered in



With such heart-shaking music, who can say  
 What are its tidings? have our troops awaked?  
 Or do they still, as if with opium drugged,  
 Snore to the murmurs of the Atlantic wave?  
 Is India free? and does she wear her plumed  
 And jewelled turban with a smile of peace,  
 Or do we grind her still? The grand debate,  
 The popular harangue, the tart reply,  
 The logic, and the wisdom, and the wit,  
 And the loud laugh—I long to know them all;  
 I burn to set the imprisoned wranglers free,  
 And give them voice and utterance once again.

30

Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,  
 Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,  
 And while the bubbling and loud hissing urn  
 Throws up a steamy column, and the cups  
 That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,  
 So let us welcome peaceful evening in.  
 Not such his evening, who with shining face  
 Sweats in the crowded theatre, and squeezed  
 And bore with elbow-points through both his sides,  
 Outcolds the ranting actor on the stage;  
 Nor his, who patient stands till his feet throb,  
 And his head thumps, to feed upon the breath  
 Of gladiators bursting with heroic rage,  
 Or placeme<sup>nt</sup>, all tranquillity and smiles.

40

This folio of four pages, happy work!  
 Which not even critics criticise; that holds  
 Inquisitive attention, while I read,  
 Fast bound in chains of silence, which the fair,  
 Though eloquent themselves, yet fear to break;  
 What is it but a nap of busy life,  
 Its fluctuations, and its vast concerns?  
 Here runs the mountainous and craggy ridge  
 That tempts ambition! On the summit, see,  
 The seals of office glitter in his eyes;

50

He climbs, he pants, he grasps them. At his heels, 60  
 Close at his heels, a demagogue ascends,  
 And with a dexterous jerk soon twists him down,  
 And wins them, but to lose them in his turn.

Here rills of oily eloquence in soft

Meanders lubricate the course they take ;

The modest speaker is ashamed and grieved

To engross a moment's notice, and yet begs,

Begs a propitious ear for his poor thoughts,

However trivial all that he conceives.

Sweet bashfulness ! it claims at least this praise ; 70

The dearth of information and good sense

That it foretells us, always comes to pass.

Cataracts of declamation thunder here,

There forests of no meaning spread the page

In which all comprehension wanders lost ;

While fields of pleasantry amuse us there

With merry descants on a nation's woes.

The rest appears a wilderness of strange

But gay confusion ; roses for the cheeks

And lilies for the brows of faded age,

Teeth for the toothless, ringlets for the bald,

Heaven, earth, and ocean plundered of their sweets,

Nectarous essences, Olympian dews,

Sermons and city feasts, and favourite airs,

~~Aethereal journeys, submarine exploits~~

~~And Katerfelto, with his hair on end,~~

~~At his own wonders, wondering for his bread.~~

'Tis pleasant through the loopholes of retreat

To peep at such a world ; to see the stir

Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd ;

To hear the roar she sends through all her gates. 80

At a safe distance, where the dying sound

Falls a soft murmur on the uninjured ear.

Thus sitting, and surveying thus at ease

The globe and its concerns, I seem advanced

To some secure and 'more than mortal height,  
 That liberates and exempts me from them all.  
 It turns submitted to my view, turns round  
 With all its generations ; I behold  
 The tumult, and am still. The sound of war 100  
 Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me ;  
 Grieves, but alarms me not. I mourn the pride  
 And avarice that make man a wolf to man,  
 Hear the faint echo of those brazen throats,  
By which he speaks the language of his heart,  
 And sigh, but never tremble at the sound.  
He travels and expatiates, as the bee  
 From flower to flower, so he from land to land ;  
 The manners, customs, policy of all  
 Pay contribution to the store he gleans ; 110  
 He sucks intelligence in every clime,  
 And spreads the honey of his deep research  
 At his return, a rich repast for me.  
 He travels, and I too. I tread his deck,  
 Ascend his topmast, through his peering eyes  
 Discover countries, with a kindred heart  
 Suffer his woes, and share in his escapes ;  
 While fancy, like the finger of a clock,  
 Runs the great circuit, and is still at home.  
 And Winter ! ruler of the inverted year, 120  
 Thy scatter'd hair with sleet like ashes filled,  
 Thy breath congealed upon thy lips, thy cheeks  
 Fringed with a beard made white with other snows  
 Than those of age, thy forehead wrapt in clouds,  
 A leafless branch thy sceptre, and thy throne  
 A sliding car, indebted to no wheels,  
 Thorough'd by storms along its slippery way ;  
 I love thee, all unlovely as thou seem'st,  
 And dreaded as thou art. Thou hold'st the sun  
 A prisoner in the yet undawning east, 130  
Shortening his journey between morn and noon,

And hurrying him, impatient of his stay,  
 Down to the rosy west ; but kindly still  
 Compensating his loss with added hours  
 Of social converse and instructive ease,  
 And gathering, at short notice, in one group  
 The family dispersed, and fixing thought,  
 Not less dispersed by daylight and its cares.  
 I crown thee King of intimate delights,  
 Fireside enjoyments, homeborn happiness,  
 And all the comforts that the lowly roof  
 Of undisturbed retirement, and the hours  
 Of long uninterrupted evening know.

140

No rattling wheels stop short before these gates ;  
 No powdered pert, proficient in the art  
 Of sounding an alarm, assaults these doors  
 Till the street rings ; no stationary steeds  
 Cough their own knell, while, heedless of the sound,  
 The silent circle fan themselves, and quake :  
 But here the needle plies its busy task,  
 The pattern grows, the well-depicted flower,  
 Wrought patiently into the snowy lawn,  
 Unfolds its bosom ; buds, and leaves, and sprigs,  
 And curling tendrils, gracefully disposed,  
 Follow the nimble finger of the fair ;  
 A wreath that cannot fade, of flowers that glow  
 With most success when all besides decay.  
 The poet's or historian's page, by one  
 Made vocal for the amusement of the rest ;  
 The sprightly lyre, whose treasure of sweet sounds  
 The touch from many a trembling chord shakes out ;  
 And the clear voice symphonious, yet distinct  
 And in the charming strife triumphant still ;  
 Beguile the night, and set a keener edge  
 On female industry : the threaded steel  
 Flies swiftly, and unfelt the task proceeds.  
 The volume closed, the customary rites

150

160

Of the last meal commence. A Roman meal,  
 Such as the mistress of the world once found  
 Delicious, when her patriots of high note, 170  
 Perhaps by moonlight, at their humble doors,  
 And under an old oak's domestic shade,  
 Enjoyed, spare feast ! a radish and an egg.  
 Discourse ensues, not trivial, yet not dull,  
 Nor such as with a frown forbids the play  
 Of fancy, or proscribes the sound of mirth ;  
 Nor do we madly, like an impious world,  
 Who deem religion frenzy, and the God  
 That made them an intruder on their joys,  
 Start at His awful name, or deem His praise 180  
 A jarring note. Themes of a graver tone,  
 Exciting oft our gratitude and love,  
 While we retrace with memory's pointing wand,  
 That calls the past to our exact review,  
 The dangers we have escaped, the broken snare,  
 The disappointed fee, deliverance found  
 Unlooked for, life preserved and peace restored,  
 Fruits of omnipotent eternal love.  
 "O evenings worthy of the gods !" exclaimed  
 The Sabine bard. O evenings, I reply, 190  
 More to be prized and coveted than yours,  
 As more illumined, and with nobler truths,  
 That I and mine, and those we love, enjoy.  
 Is Winter hideous in a garb like this ?  
 Needs he the tragic fur, the smoke of lamps,  
 The pent-up breath of an unsavoury throng,  
 To thaw him into feeling, or the smart  
 And snappish dialogue that flippant wits  
 Can medley, to prompt him with a smile ?  
 The self-complacent actor, when he views 200  
 (Stealing a sidelong glance at a full house) "  
 The slope of faces from the floor to the roof  
 (As if one master spring controlled them all)

Relaxed into an universal grin,  
 Sees not a countenance there that speaks of joy  
 Half so refined or so sincere as ours.  
 Cards were superfluous here, with all the tricks  
 That idleness has ever yet contrived  
 To fill the void of an unfurnished brain,  
 To palliate dulness, and give time a shove. 210  
 Time as he passes us, has a dove's wing,  
 Unsoiled and swift, and of a silken sound ;  
 But the world's Time is Time in masquerade.  
 Theirs, should I paint him, has his pinions fledged *wing*.  
 With motley plumes ; and where the peacock shows  
 His azure eyes, is tintured black and red  
 With spots quadrangular of diamond form,  
 Eusanguined hearts, clubs typical of strife,  
 And spades, the emblems of untimely graves.  
 What should be, and what was an hour-glass once, 220  
 Becomes a dice-box, and a billiard mast  
 Well does the work of his destructive scythe.  
 Thus decked, he charms a world whom fashion blinds  
 To his true worth, most pleased when idle most  
 Whose only happy are their wasted hours.  
 Even misses, at whose age their mothers wore  
 The backstring and the bilb, assume the dress  
 Of womanhood, sit pupils in the school  
 Of card-devoted Time, and night by night  
 Placed at some vacant corner of the board, 230  
 Learn every trick, and soon play all the game.  
 But truce with censure. Roving as I rove,  
 Where shall I find an end, or how proceed ?  
 As he that travels far, oft turns aside  
 To view some rugged rock or mouldering tower,  
 Which seen, delights him not ; then coming home,  
 Describes and prints it, that the world may know  
 How far he went for what was nothing worth ;  
 So I, with brush in hand and pallet spread

With colours mixed for a far different use,  
Paint cards and dolls, and every idle thing  
That fancy finds in her excursive flights.

240

Come, Evening, once again, season of peace ;  
 Return, sweet Evening, and continue long !  
 Methinks I see thee in the streaky west,  
 With matron step slow moving, while the Night  
Treads on thy sweeping train ; one hand employed  
 In letting fall the curtain of repose

On bird and beast, the other charged for man

With sweet oblivion of the cares of day ;

250

Not sumptuously adorned, nor needing aid,  
 Like homely-featured Night, of clustering gems ;

A star or two just twinkling on thy brow

Suffices thee ; save that the moon is thine

No less than hers, not worn indeed on high

With ostentatious pageantry, but set

With modest grandeur in thy purple zone,

Resplendent less, but of an ampler round.

Come then, and thou shalt find thy votary calm,

Or make me so. Composure is thy gift :

260

And whether I devote thy gentler hours

To books, to music, or the poet's toil ;

To weaving nets for bird-alluring fruit ;

~~Or catching~~ silken threads round ivory reels,

When they command whom man was born to please ;

I slight thee not, but make thee welcome still.

Just when our drawing-rooms begin to blaze

With lights, by clear reflection multiplied

From many a mirror, in which he of Gath,

Goliath, might have seen his giant bulk

270

Whole without stopping, towering crest and all,

My pleasures too begin. But me perhaps

The glowing hearth may satisfy awhile

With faint illumination, that uplifts

The shadow to the ceiling, there by fits

Dancing uncouthly to the quivering flame.

Not undelightful is an hour to me

So spent in parlour twilight, such a gloom

Suits well the thoughtful or unthinking mind,

The mind contemplative, with some new theme 280

Preguant, or indisposed alike to all, *excludes*

Laugh ye, who boast your more mercurial powers,

That never feel a stupor, know no pause,

Nor need one; I am conscious, and confess,

Fearless, a soul that does not always think.

Me oft has fancy, ludicrous and wild, *sports me*

Soothed with a waking dream of houses, towers,

Trees, churches, and strange visages expressed

In the red cinders, while with poring eye

I gazed, myself creating what I saw. 290

Nor less amused have I quiescent watched

The sooty films that play upon the bars

Pendulous, and foreboding, in the view

Of superstition, prophesying still,

Though still deceived, some stranger's near approach.

'Tis thus the understanding takes repose

In indolent vacuity of thought,

And sleeps and is refreshed. Meanwhile the face

Conceals the mood lethargic with a mask

Of deep deliberation, as the man

Were tasked to his full strength, absorbed and lost. 300

Thus oft, reclined at ease, I lose an hour

At evening, till at length the freezing blast,

That sweeps the bolted shutter, summons home

The recollected powers, and snapping short

The glassy threads with which the fancy weaves

Her brittle toys, restores me to myself.

How calm is my recess, and how the frost,

Raging abroad, and the rough wind, endear

The silence and the warmth enjoyed within! 310

I saw the woods and fields at close of day /



A variegated show ; 'the meadows green,  
 Though faded ; and the lands, where lately waved  
 The golden harvest, of a mellow brown,  
 Upturned so lately by the forceful share :  
 I saw far off the weedy fallows smile  
 With verdure not unprofitable, grazed  
 By flocks, fast feeding, and selecting each  
 His favourite herb ; while all the leafless groves  
 That skirt the horizon, wore a sable hue,  
 Scarce noticed in the kindred dusk of eve. 320  
 To-morrow brings a change, a total change !  
 Which even now, though silently performed  
 And slowly, and by most unfelt, the face  
 Of universal nature undergoes.  
 Fast falls a fleecy shower : the downy flakes  
 Descending, and, with never-ceasing lapse,  
 Softly alighting upon all below,  
 Assimilate all objects. Earth receives  
 Gladly the thickening mantle, and the green 330  
 And tender blade that feared the chilling blast  
 Escapes unhurt beneath so warm a veil.

In such a world, so thorny, and where none  
 Finds happiness unblighted, or, if found,  
 Without some thistly sorrow at its side,  
 It seems the part of wisdom, and no sin  
 Against the law of love, to measure lots  
 With less distinguished than ourselves, that thus  
 We may with patience bear our moderate ills,  
 And sympathise with others, suffering more. 340  
 Ill fares the traveller now, and he that stalks  
 In ponderous boots beside his reeking team.  
 The wain goes heavily, impeded sore  
 By congregated loads adhering close  
 To the clogged wheels ; and in its sluggish pace  
 Noiseless appears a moving hill of snow.  
 The toiling steeds expand the nostril wide.

While every breath, by respiration strong  
 Forced downward, is consolidated soon  
 Upon their jutting chests. <sup>long power</sup> He, formed to bear 350  
 The pelting brunt of the tempestuous night,  
 With half-shut eyes and puckered cheeks, and teeth  
 Presented bare against the storm, plods on.  
 One hand secures his hat, save when with both  
 He brandishes his <sup>resounding</sup> pliant length of whip,  
 Resounding oft, and never heard in vain,  
 Oh happy ! and in my account, denied  
 That sensibility of pain with which  
 Refinement is endued, thrice happy thou.  
 Thy frame, robust and hardy, feels indeed 360  
 The piercing cold, but feels it unimpaired.  
 The learned finger never need explore  
 Thy vigorous pulse ; and the unhealthful east,  
 That breathes the spleen, and searches every bone  
 Of the infirm, is wholesome as to thee.  
 Thy days roll on exempt from household care ;  
 The waggon is thy wife ; and the poor beasts  
 That drag the dull companion to and fro,  
 Thine helpless charge, dependent on thy care.  
 Ah, treat them kindly ! rude as thou appearest, 370  
 Yet show that thou hast mercy, which the great,  
 With needless hurry whirled from place to place  
 Humane as they would seem, not always show.  
 Poor, yet industrious, modest, quiet, neat,  
 Such claim compassion in a night like this,  
 And have a friend in every feeling heart.  
 Warmed, while it lasts, by labour, all day long  
 They brave the season, and yet find at eve  
 Till clad and fed but sparsely, time to cool.  
 The frugal housewife trembles when she lights 380  
 Her scanty stock of brushwood, blazing clear,  
 But dying soon, like all terrestrial joys.  
 The few small embers left she nurses well,

And while her infant race, with outspread hands,  
 And crowded knees, sit cowering o'er the sparks,  
 Retires, content to quake, so they be warmed.  
 The man feels least, as more inured than she  
 To winter, and the current in his veins  
 More briskly moved by his severer toil ;  
 Yet he too finds his own distress in theirs. 390  
 The taper soon extinguished, which I saw  
 Dangled along at the cold finger's end  
 Just when the day declined, and the brown loaf  
 Lodged on the shelf, half eaten without sauce  
 Of savoury cheese, or butter costlier still,  
 Sleep seems their only refuge : for, alas !  
 Where penury is felt the thought is chained,  
 And sweet colloquial pleasures are but few.  
 With all this thrift they thrive not. All the care,  
 Ingenious parsimony takes, but just 400  
 Saves the small inventory, bed and stool,  
 Skillet and old carved chest, from public sale.  
 They live, and live without extorted alms  
 From grudging hands, but other boast have none  
 To soothe their honest pride, that scorns to beg ;  
 Nor comfort else, but in their mutual love.  
 I praise you much, ye meek and patient pair,  
 For ye are worthy ; choosing rather far  
 A dry but independent crust, hard earned,  
 And eaten with a sigh, than to endure 410  
 The rugged frowns and insolent rebuffs  
 Of knaves in office, partial in the work  
 Of distribution : liberal of their aid  
 To clamorous importunity in rage,  
 But oftentimes deaf to suppliants who would blush  
 To wear a tattered garb however coarse  
 Whom famine cannot reconcile to filth ;  
 These ask with painful shyness, and refused  
 Because deserving, silently retire.

But be ye of good courage. Time itself  
 Shall much befrend you. Time shall give increase.  
 And all your numerous progeny, well trained  
 But helpless, in few years shall find their hands,  
 And labour too. Meanwhile ye shall not want  
 What, conscious of your virtues, we can spare,  
 Nor what a wealthier than ourselves may send.  
 I mean the man who, when the distant poor  
 Need help, denies them nothing but his name.

But poverty, with most who whimper forth  
 Their long complaints, is self-inflicted woe ;  
 The effect of laziness or sottish waste.

Now goes the nightly thief prowling abroad  
 For plunder ; much solicitous how best  
 He may compensate for a day of sloth,  
 By works of darkness and nocturnal wrong.  
 Woe to the gardener's pale, the farmer's hedge  
 Plashed neatly, and secured with driven stakes  
 Deep in the loamy bank. Uptorn by strength,  
 Resistless in so bad a cause, but lame  
 To better deeds, he bundles up the spoil,  
 An ass's burden, and when laden most  
 And heaviest, light of foot steals fast away  
 Nor does the boarded hovel better guard  
 The well-stacked pile of riven logs and roots  
 From his pernicious force. Nor will he leave  
 Unwrenched the door, however well secured,  
 Where chanticleer amidst his harem sleeps  
 In unsuspecting pomp. Twitched from the perch,  
 He gives the princely bird, with all his wives,  
 To his voracious bag, struggling in vain,  
 And loudly wondering at the sudden change.  
 Nor this to feed his own. 'Twere some excuse  
 Did pity of their sufferings warp aside  
 His principle, and tempt him into sin

For their support, so destitute. But they

Neglected pine at home, themselves, as more  
 Exposed than others, with less scruple made  
 His victims, robbed of their defenceless all.  
 Cruel is all he does. 'Tis quenchless thirst  
 Of ruinous ebriety that prompts, 460  
 His every action, and imbrutes the man.

Oh for a law to noose the villain's neck  
 Who starves his own : who persecutes the blood  
 He gave them in his children's veins, and hates  
 And wrongs the woman he has sworn to love !

Pass where we may, through city or through town,  
 Village or hamlet, of this merry land,  
 Though lean and beggared, every twentieth pace  
 Conducts the unguarded nose to such a whiff 470  
 Of stale debauch, forth issuing from the styces  
 That law has licensed, as makes temperance reel.

There sit, involved and lost in curling clouds  
 Of Indian fume, and guzzling deep, the boor,  
 The lackey, and the groom ; the craftsman there  
 Takes a Lethean leave of all his toil ;  
 Smith, cobbler, joiner, he that plies the shears,  
 And he that kneads the dough ; all loud alike,  
 All learned, and all drunk. The fiddle screams  
 Plaintive and piteous, as it wept and wailed  
 Its wretched tones and harmony unheard ; 480

Pierce the dispute, whatever the theme ; while she,  
 Fell Discord, arbitress of such debate,  
 Perched on the sign-post, holds with even hand  
 Her undecisive scales. In this she lays

A weight of ignorance ; in that, of pride ;  
 And smiles delighted with the eternal poise.  
 Dye is the frequent curse, and its twin sound  
 The cheek-distending oath, not to be praised  
 As ornamental, musical, polite,  
 Like those which modern senators employ, 490  
 Whose oath is rhetoric, and who swear for fame.

Behold the schools in which plebeian minds,  
 Once simple, are initiated in arts  
 Which some may practise with politer grace,  
 But none with readier skill ! 'Tis here they learn  
 The road that leads from competence and peace  
 To indigence and rapine ; till at last  
 Society, grown weary of the load,  
 Shakes her encumbered lap, and casts them out.  
 But censure profits little : vain the attempt  
 To advertise in verse a public pest,  
 That like the filth with which the peasant feeds  
 His hungry acres, stinks, and is of use.  
 The Excise is fattened with the rich result  
 Of all this riot ; and ten thousand casks,  
 For ever dribbling out their base contents,  
 Touched by the Midas finger of the State,  
 Bleed gold for ministers to sport away.  
 Drink and be mad then : 'tis your country bids !  
 Gloriously drunk, obey the important call !  
 Her cause demands the assistance of your throats ;  
 Ye all can swallow, and she asks no more.

500

510

Would I had fallen upon those happier days  
 That poets celebrate ; those golden times  
 And those Arcadian scenes that Maro sings,  
 And Sidney, warbler of poetic prose.  
 Nymphs were Dianas then, and swains had hearts  
 That felt their virtues : Innocence, it seems,  
 From courts dismissed, found shelter in the groves.  
 The footsteps of simplicity, impressed  
 Upon the yielding herbage (so they sing),  
 Then were not all effaced ; then speech profane,  
 And manners profligate, were rarely found,  
 Observed as prodigies, and soon reclaimed.  
 Vain wish ! those days were never : airy dreams  
 Sat for the picture ; and the poet's hand,  
 Imparting substance to an empty shade,

520

Imposed a gay delirium for a truth.  
 Grant it : I still must envy them an age  
 That favoured such a dream, in days like these 530  
 Impossible, when Virtue is so scarce,  
 That to suppose a scene where she presides  
 Is tramontane, and stumbles all belief.  
 No : we are polished now. The rural lass,  
 Whom once her virgin modesty and grace,  
 Her artless manner, and her neat attire,  
 So dignified, that she was hardly less  
 Than the fair shepherdess of old romance,  
 Is seen no more. The character is lost.  
 Her head, adorned with lappets pinned aloft, 540  
 And ribands streaming gay, superbly raised,  
 And magnified beyond all human size,  
 Indebted to some smart wig-weaver's hand  
 For more than half the tresses it sustains ;  
 Her elbows ruffled, and her tottering form  
 Ill propped upon French heels ; she might be deemed  
 (But that the basket dangling on her arm  
 Interprets her more truly) of a rank  
 Too proud for dairy work or sale of eggs.  
 Expect her soon with footboy at her heels, 550  
 No longer blushing for her awkward load,  
 Her stain and her umbrella all her care.  
 The town has tinged the country ; and the stain  
 Appears a spot upon a vestal's robe,  
 The worse for what it soils. The fashion runs  
 Down into scenes still rural ; but, alas !  
 Scenes rarely graced with rural manners now.  
 Time was when in the pastoral retreat  
 The unguarded door was safe ; men did not watch  
 To invade another's right, or guard their own. 560  
 Then sleep was undisturbed by fear, unscared  
 By drunken howlings ; and the chilling tale  
 Of midnight murder was a wonder heard

With doubtful credit, told to frighten babes.  
 But farewell now to unsuspicious nights,  
 And slumbers unalarmed. Now, ere you sleep,  
 See that your polished arms be primed with care,  
 And drop the nightbolt ; ruffians are abroad ;  
 And the first larum of the cock's shrill throat  
 May prove a trumpet, summoning your ear 570  
 To horrid sounds of hostile feet within.  
 Even daylight has its dangers ; and the walk  
 Through pathless wastes and woods, unconscious once  
 Of other tenants than melodious birds  
 Or harmless flocks, is hazardous and bold.  
 Lamented change ! to which full many a cause  
 Inveterate, hopeless of a cure, conspires.  
 The course of human things from good to ill,  
 From ill to worse, is fatal, never fails.  
 Increase of power begets increase of wealth ; 580  
 Wealth luxury, and luxury excess ;  
 Excess, the scrofulous and itchy plague  
 That seizes first the opulent, descends  
 To the next rank contagious, and in time  
 Taints downward all the graduated scale  
 Of order, from the chariot to the plough.  
 The rich, and they that have an arm to check  
 The licence of the lowest in degree,  
 Desert their office ; and themselves intent  
 On pleasure, haunt the capital, and thus 590  
 To all the violence of lawless hands  
 Resign the scenes their presence might protect.  
 Authority herself not seldom sleeps,  
 Though resident, and witness of the wrong.  
 The plump convivial parson often bears  
 The magisterial sword in vain, and lays  
 His reverence and his worship, both to rest  
 On the same cushion of habitual sloth.  
 Perhaps timidity restrains his arm ;



When he should strike, he trembles, and sets free, 600  
 Himself enslaved by terror of the band,  
 The audacious convict, whom he dares not bind.  
 Perhaps, though by profession ghostly pure,  
 He too may have his vice, and sometimes prove  
 Less dainty than becomes his grave outside  
 In lucrative concerns. Examine well

His milk-white hand ; the palm is hardly clean ,  
 But here and there an ugly smutch appears.  
 Foh ! 'twas a bribe that left it : he has touched  
 Corruption. Whoso seeks an audit here 610  
 Propitious, pays his tribute, game or fish,  
 Wildfowl or venison, and his errand speeds.

But faster far, and more than all the rest,  
 A noble cause, which none who bears a spark  
 Of public virtue ever wished removed,  
 Works the deplored and mischievous effect.  
 'Tis universal soldiership has stabbed  
 The heart of merit in the meaner class.  
 Arms, through the vanity and brainless rage  
 Of those that bear them, in whatever cause, 620  
 Seem most at variance with all moral good,  
 And incompatible with serious thought.  
 The clown, the child of nature, without guile,  
 Blest with an infant's ignorance of all

But his own simple pleasures, now and then  
 A wrestling-match, a foot-race, or a fair,  
 Is halloped, and trembles at the news :  
 Sheepish he doffs his hat, and mumbling swears  
 A Bible-oath to be whate'er they please,  
 To do he knows not what. The task performed, 630  
 That instant he becomes the serjeant's care,  
 His pupil, and his torment, and his jest.  
 His awkward gait, his introverted toes,  
 Bent knees, round shoulders, and dejected looks,  
 Procure him many a curse. By slow degrees,

Unapt to learn, and formed of stubborn stuff,  
 He yet by slow degrees puts off himself,  
 Grows conscious of a change, and likes it well ;  
 He stands erect ; his slouch becomes a walk ;  
 He steps right onward, martial in his air, ✓ 640  
 His form, and movement ; is as smart above  
 As meal and larded locks can make him ; wears  
 His hat, or his plumed helmet, with a grace ;  
 And, his three years of heroship expired,  
 Returns indignant to the slighted plough.  
 He hates the field, in which no fife or drum  
 Attends him, drives his cattle to a march,  
 And sighs for the smart comrades he has left.  
 'Twere well if his exterior change were all ;  
 But with his clumsy port the wretch has lost 650  
 His ignorance and harmless manners too.  
 To swear, to game, to drink, to show at home  
 By lewdness, idleness, and Sabbath breach,  
 The great proficiency he made abroad,  
 To astonish and to grieve his gazing friends,  
 To break some maiden's and his mother's heart,  
 To be a pest where he was useful once, *werdeltay*  
 Are his sole aim, and all his glory now.

Man in society is like a flower  
 Blown in its native bed ; 'tis there alone 660  
 His faculties, expanded in full bloom,  
 Shine out ; there only reach their proper use.  
 But man associated and leagued with man  
 By regal warrant, or self-joined by bond  
 For interest sake, or swarming into clans  
 Beneath one head for purposes of war,  
 Like flowers selected from the rest, and bound  
 And buddled close to fill some crowded vase,  
 Fades rapidly, and by compression marred,  
 Contracts defilement not to be endured. 670  
 Hence chartered boroughs are such public plagues ;

And burghers, men immaculate perhaps  
 In all their private functions, once combined,  
 Become a loathsome body, only fit *Accurs'd*  
 For dissolution, hurtful to the main.

Hence merchants, unimpeachable of sin  
 Against the charities of domestic life,  
 Incorporated, seem at once to lose  
 Their nature, and disclaiming all regard  
 For mercy and the common rights of man,  
 Build factories with blood, conducting trade  
 At the sword's point, and dyeing the white robe  
 Of innocent commercial justice red.

680

Hence too the field of glory, as the world  
 Misdeems it, dazzled by its bright array,  
 With all its majesty of thundering pomp,  
 Enchanting music, and immortal wreaths,  
 Is but a school where thoughtlessness is taught  
 On principle, where foppery atones  
 For folly, gallantry for every vice.

690

But slighted as it is, and by the great  
 Abandoned, and, which still I more regret,  
 Infected with the manners and the modes  
 It knew not once, the country wins me still.  
 I never framed a wish, or formed a plan,  
 That flattered me with hopes of earthly bliss,  
 But there I laid the scene. There early strayed  
My fancy, ere yet liberty of choice  
Had found me, or the hope of being free.  
 My very dreams were rural, rural too

700

The firstborn efforts of my youthful muse,  
 Sportive, and jingling her poetic bells  
 Ere yet her ear was mistress of their powers.  
 No bard could please me but whose lyre was tuned  
 To Nature's praises. Heroes and their feats  
 Fatigued me, never weary of the pipe  
 Of Tityrus, assembling, as he sang,

The rustic throng beneath his favourite beech.  
 Then MILTON had indeed a poet's charms :  
 New to my taste, his Paradise surpassed 710  
 The struggling efforts of my boyish tongue  
 To speak its excellence ; I danced for joy.  
 I marvelled much that, at so ripe an age  
 As twice seven years, his beauties had then first  
 Engaged my wonder, and admiring still,  
 And still admiring, with regret supposed  
 The joy half lost because not sooner found.  
 Thee too, enamoured of the life I loved,  
 Pathetic in its praise, in its pursuit  
 Determined, and possessing it at last 720  
 With transports such as favoured lovers feel,  
 I studied, prized, and wished that I had known,  
 Ingenious Cowley ! and though now reclaimed  
 By modern lights from an erroneous taste,  
 I cannot but lament thy splendid wit  
 Entangled in the cobwebs of the schools ;  
 I still revere thee, courtly though retired,  
 Though stretched at ease in Chertsey's silent bowers,  
 Not unemployed, and finding rich amends  
 For a lost world in solitude and verse. 730  
 'Tis born with all : the love of Nature's works  
 Is an ingredient in the compound, man,  
 Infused at the creation of the kind.  
 And though the Almighty Maker has throughout  
 Discriminated each from each, by strokes  
 And touches of His hand, with so much art  
 Diversified, that two were never found  
 Twins at all points—yet this obtains in all,  
 That all discern a beauty in His works, 739  
 And all can taste them : minds that have been formed  
 And tutored with a relish more exact,  
 But none without some relish, none unmoved.  
 It is a flame that dies not even there

Where nothing feeds it : neither business, crowds,  
 Nor habits of luxurious city life,  
 Whatever else they smother of true worth  
 In human bosoms, quench it or abate.  
 The villas with which London stands begirt,  
 Like a swarth Lidian with his belt of beads,  
 Prove it. A breath of unadulterate air, 750  
 The glimpse of a green pasture, how they cheer  
 The citizen, and brace his languid frame !  
 Even in the stifling bosom of the town,  
 A garden in which nothing thrives has charms  
 That soothe the rich possessor ; much consoled  
 That here and there some sprigs of mournful mint,  
 Of nightshade, or valerian, grace the well 760  
 He cultivates. These serve him with a hint  
 That Nature lives ; that sight-refreshing green  
 Is still the livery she delights to wear, 760  
 Though sickly samples of the exuberant whole.  
 What are the casements lined with creeping herbs,  
 The prouder sashes fronted with a range  
 Of orange, myrtle, or the fragrant weed,  
 The Frenchman's darling ? Are they not all proofs  
 That man, immured in cities, still retains  
 His inborn inextinguishable thirst  
 Of rural scenes, compensating his loss  
 By supplemental shifts, the best he may ?  
 The most unfurnished with the means of life, 770  
 And they that never pass their brick-wall bounds  
 To range the fields and treat their lungs with air,  
 Yet feel the burning instinct ; over-head  
 Suspend their crazy boxes, planted thick,  
 And watered duly. There the pitcher stands  
 A fragment, and the spoutless teapot there ;  
 Sad witnesses how close-pent man regrets  
 The country, with what ardour he contrives,  
 A peep at nature, when he can no more.

Hail, therefore, patroness of health and ease 780  
 And contemplation, heart-consoling joys  
 And harmless pleasures, in the thronged abode  
 Of multitudes unknown ! hail, rural life !  
 Address himself who will to the pursuit  
 Of honours, or emolument, or fame, •  
 I shall not add myself to such a chase,  
 Thwart his attempts, or envy his success.  
 Some must be great. Great offices will have  
 Great talents : and God gives to every man  
 The virtue, temper, understanding, taste, 790  
 That lifts him into life, and lets him fall  
 Just in the niche he was ordained to fill.  
 To the deliverer of an injured land  
 He gives a tongue to enlarge upon, a heart  
 To feel, and courage to redress her wrongs ;  
 To monarchs dignity ; to judges sense ;  
 To artists ingenuity and skill ;  
 To me an unambitious mind, content  
 In the low vale of life, that early felt  
 A wish for ease and leisure, and eye long 800  
 Found here that leisure and that ease I wished.

## NOTES.

1. This, the reading of the first edition, with a note of exclamation after "horn," and a comma after "bright" (l. 4), is better than the later reading, which has no stop after "horn," and places a semicolon followed by a dash after "bright."

'tis the twanging horn! It is often thus used in poetry, where a relative clause must be mentally supplied: 'It is the twanging horn *that I hear.*' The horn is the postman's horn, and *twang* is an imitative word, expressing its sharp, quick note. Cf. *Table Talk*, 29-32:—

" But let eternal Infamy pursue  
The wretch, to naught but his ambition true,  
Who for the sake of filling with one blast  
The post-horn of all Europe, lays her waste."

Wordsworth also mentions "the street-disturbing newsman's horn" (*Prelude*, xi. 42), and "the newsman's blast" (*Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*, xxxv. 3).

2. wearisome but needful length. The bridge over the Ouse at Oney is "wearisome," because it crosses the whole valley between Olney and Emberton; and "needful," on account of winter floods which frequently cover the whole ground with water.

3. Bestrides, strides over; crosses. The prefix *be-* (= by) gives a transitive force.

4. unwrinkled. Because the water's surface was calm and unruddled by wind. Hence the force of "bright." So in his lines *To C. P.*, Cowper speaks of "the unwrinkled waters" of "the still Lethean lake."

5. He comes ... world, the postman, who brings news of the busy world. He rode on horseback (see l. 22), carrying the mail-bags strapped on to his back. Mail-coaches were not

started till August, 1784, the year in which Cowper finished the *Task*. The poet was among those

"who, far from town,  
Wait till the postman brings the packet down."  
(Crabbe, *The Newspaper*).

The post arrived at Olney three times in the week.

7. **News ... back.** An absolute clause. **Lumbering**, because the mail-bags were heavy and cumbersome. *Lumber* is probably an imitative word expressive of the motion of a heavy body, and cognate with *lump* and *clumsy*.

8-11. **True ... pass on.** "True," "careless," and "having dropped," all agree with "him," contained in "his" (= of him). Cf. ll. 42, 46, 455, and notes. The postman is careful of his mail, but heedless of the news it contains, his sole object being to deliver the letter-bag at the inn to which it is addressed, and then continue his journey. The inn formed a central place from which the letters or newspapers were distributed to the inhabitants of the town. Thus, in one of his Letters (*To Lady Heskelh*, Dec. 24, 1786), Cowper remarks on the carelessness of the hostess of the *Swan*, "where letters are sometimes overlooked, and do not arrive at their destination, if no enquiry be made, till some days have passed after their arrival at Olney." And cf. *To Lady Heskelh*, Dec. 7, 1785: "A neighbour of ours being this day at Newport, saw a letter addressed to me in the window of the inn, and delivered it to me while I was at dinner."

12. **He whistles as he goes.** So Dryden, *Cymon and Iphigenia*, 84:—

"He trudged along, unknowing what he sought,  
And whistled as he went, for want of thought."

**wretch** means here little more than 'fellow,' 'creature.' It is used playfully, as 'rogue' sometimes is.

15. **To him indifferent**, i.e. 'it being indifferent to him'—an absolute clause. *Indifferent* = unimportant.

16. **the fall of stocks**, the fall in price of the public funds (what is known in India as 'Government Paper').

17. **Births, deaths, and marriages.** The logical order would be 'Births, marriages, and deaths'; but 'births' and 'deaths' are placed together as a natural antithetical couple, to which 'marriages' is an addition. Cf. 'Good, bad, and indifferent.'

19. **periods, sentences.**

**fluent quill.** The epithet is transferred from the writer to his pen.



20, 21. **charged ... responsive.** Some of the letters are supposed to be those of distant lovers to their mistresses, or the ladies' replies to them. "Charged with" = containing (cf. l. 249), and "charged" agrees with "epistles" above. *Swain* properly a peasant, was used in pastoral poetry for *lover*, and so came to be regarded as its poetical equivalent by 18th century writers. Similarly, *nymph* was "poetical" for *girl* or *maiden*. See l. 517, and notes to ll. 165, 391; and cf. Bk. iii. 316, quoted in note to l. 364. Also Crabbe, *The Village*, i. 35, 36:—

"The happy youth" (i.e. the pastoral poet) assumes the common strain,

A nymph his mistress, and himself a swain."

See Introduction, p. xxx.

23. **budget** is to be parsed as the objective of exclamation; cf. 'Unhappy me!' *Budget* is the French *bouquette*, dim. of *bouge*, from Latin *bulga*, a bag, a word of Celtic origin.

23, 24. **ushered in ... music.** Its approach was announced by the "twanging horn" (l. 1).

25. **have our troops awaked?** etc. 'What is the news of our army in America? Is the war there being conducted with the same want of energy as heretofore?' The war between England and her American colonies, commenced in 1775, was marked by several disasters to the English arms. In 1776 the English, under Sir William Howe, were forced to evacuate Boston, and in 1777 followed the surrender of General Burgoyne and his whole army at Saratoga. On Oct. 19, 1781, Lord Cornwallis, with an army of 7000 men, capitulated to Washington at York Town. See Introduction, p. xi.

In two other passages in the *Task* (i. 771-774, ii. 225-232) Cowper satirizes the lack of vigour that, in his opinion, was shown by the English commanders in prosecuting this war. Cf. *Albion's Defeat*, 194, 195:—

"Generals, who will not conquer when they may,  
Firm friends to peace, to pleasure and good pay."

And *Letters, To Unwin*, 1781: "Pitt himself could have done nothing with such tools: but he would not have been so betrayed; he would have made the traitors answer with their heads for their cowardice or supineness, and their punishment would have made survivors active"; with which cf. Bk. iii. 88-92:—

"He that sold  
His country, or was slack when she required  
His every nerve in action and at stretch,  
Paid with the blood that he had basely spared  
The price of his default."

The *Task* was begun in the summer of 1783, and finished in about a year,<sup>1</sup> whereas peace was concluded with America in Nov., 1782. Why, then, should Cowper ask, 'Have our troops awaked?' seeing that the war was over and a thing of the past? It is out of the question to suppose that he was behindhand with his news, since we know from the frequent comments in his *Letters*<sup>2</sup> that he keenly followed the political events of his time, and must have been fully aware when he wrote this passage that England and America were no longer in arms against each other. The true explanation of the difficulty seems to be this:—Cowper does not profess to be writing *up to date*, but is giving an *ideal* sketch of the contents of a newspaper of his day, and so chooses, for the purpose of his delineation, to throw himself back to an eventual period slightly anterior to that at which he was writing.

27. *Shore to the murmurs.* 'Are our troops still sluggish and inactive—as it were lulled to sleep by the sound of the waves of the Atlantic Ocean that break on the shores of America?' This to means 'in unison with,' 'in response to'; cf. ll. 276, 647.

28. *Is India free?* etc. India and its affairs were attracting much attention at this time. In 1780 the second Mysore war broke out, and in 1781 Haidar Ali was defeated by Sir Eyre Coote in several battles. The war was continued by Haidar's son, Tipu, till peace was concluded in 1783. In the same year Fox's India Bill was passed by the House of Commons but rejected by the Lords, and in 1784 Pitt's India Bill was passed. See Introduction, p. xii.

*does she wear*, etc. India is personified as wearing a turban decked with feathers and jewels. *Plumed* and *jewelled* are both adjectives formed by the suffix *-ed* from the nouns *plume* and *jewel*.

30. *do we grind her still?* There was a strong, but for the most part unjustifiable (see Introduction, pp. xii. xv.) feeling in England at this time that the East India Company's dealings with India had been avaricious and oppressive—a feeling which culminated in the impeachment of Warren Hastings in 1786. Cf. ll. 681-683 below, and a passage in *Expostulation* (364-375) beginning

"Hast thou, though suckled at fair Freedom's breast,  
Exported slavery to the conquered East?"

And Bk. i. 736-738:—

"Thieves at home must hang, but he that pats  
Into his overgorged and bloated purse  
The wealth of Indian provinces, escapes."

<sup>1</sup> See *Letters*, To Lady Hesketh, Jan. 16, 1786.

<sup>2</sup> To Newton, Feb. 24, 1783, is conclusive on this point. See also note to l. 34.

Also *ib.* ii. 12-15. And *cf.* *Letters, To Unwin*, Jan. 3, 1784: "They (the East India Company) have possessed themselves of an immense territory, which they have ruled with a rod of iron . . . making the happiness of thirty millions of mankind a consideration subordinate to that of their own emolument, oppressing them as often as it may serve a lucrative purpose, and in no instance, that I have ever heard, consulting their interest or advantage." See also l. 681 and note.

30. The grand debate is perhaps that on Pitt's India Bill on Jan. 3, 1784, one of several debates which marked the struggle between Pitt and the Opposition from Dec. 1783 to March 1784. Parliamentary debates were first published regularly in the newspapers in 1771.

33. I long to know them all, I long to open my newspaper and read about them.

34. I burn . . . free. 'The smart sayings and retorts of the Parliamentary debaters are at present locked up within the columns of the newspaper; I am eager to set them free by reading them.' For Cowper's fondness for a newspaper, *cf.* *Letters, To Lady Hesketh*, Oct. 5, 1787: "The pertness of the *Herald* is my detestation, yet I always read it; and why? because it is a newspaper, and should therefore doubtless read it, were it ten times more disgusting than it is." And *To Unwin*, Feb. 29, 1784: "I read Johnson's Prefaces every night except when the newspaper calls me off. At a time like the present, what author can stand in competition with a newspaper?"

37. Let fall . . . round, draw the window curtains, and wheel the sofa round towards the fire-place. For this picture, see introduction, pp. xxvi., xxvii.

38, 39. the bubbling . . . column. As the water boils in the tea-kettle, it bubbles and hisses, and sends a column of steam from the spout.

39, 40. the cups inebriate, i.e. cups of tea, which cheer but do not intoxicate, like alcoholic liquors. *Cf.* Berkeley, *Siris*, par. 217: "(Tar-water) is of a nature so mild and benign and proportional to the human constitution, as to warm without heating, to cheer but not inebriate." *Not inebriate* is for *do not inebriate* or *inebriate not*; *cf.* l. 373, and Tennyson, *Queen Mary*: "Who saved it or not saved." The usage occurs several times in Shakespeare, as in *Tempest*, v. i. 38: "Whereof the ewe not bites," and is common in the earlier authors. Tea was Cowper's favourite beverage; *cf.* Bk. iii. 391, where he represents himself as "sipping calm the fragrant lymph"; and *Conversation*, 268, where "sea-born Venus" (i.e. the ladies)

"Sips meek infusions of a milder herb."

41. So (= in this manner) refers us back to *while* in l. 38.

42. **who** has for its antecedent *him* contained in *his* (= of him); cf. notes to ll. 8, 46, 455.

**shining**, glistening with perspiration. Cf. Shakspeare, *As You Like It*, II. vii. 146 (of the schoolboy): "With shining morning face," where *shining* means well polished with soap and water.

44, 45. **bored ... stage**. The spectators are so crowded that they thrust their elbows into one another's sides and abuse one another in consequence.

45. **Outscolds** = scolds louder than; cf. *outride*, *outweigh*, etc.

46. **Nor his**, i.e. nor is such the evening of him who, etc. The man who stands in a crowded hall and listens to a political harangue till his feet throb with weariness and his head aches, is next depicted.

47. **thumps**, 'pulsates.' The verb is used intransitively here. So Crabbe (*The Village*, i. 144, 145) of the labouring poor:—

"See them beneath the dogstar's raging heat,  
When the knees tremble and the temples beat."

**to feed upon the breath**, 'to listen eagerly to the speeches.' Cf. Shaks. *Hamlet*, IV. v. 89: "Her brother ... feeds on his wonder." *Breath*, for *words*, is not uncommon in poetry; cf. Shaks. *Midsummer Night's Dream*, II. i. 151: "Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath" (= sounds).

48, 49. **patriots ... smiles**. The "patriots," who denounce the acts of the Government, are the Opposition (i.e. the party in Parliament that is out of office), while the "placemen" are the Government or party in office. The "Patriots, as they called themselves, came into existence as a "popular" or anti-Corruption party during Walpole's administration (1721-1742), and claimed to be the champions of the cause of honesty and freedom against ministerial corruption and royal ascendancy." Cf. *Friendship*, 127-129:—

"Courtier and Patriot cannot mix  
Their heterogeneous politics  
Without an effervescence."

Cowper uses the term *patriot* ironically here. Cf. his poem *The Modern Patriot*, and *Table Talk*, 191:—

"Patriots who love good places at their hearts";  
and *ib.* 143, 144:—

"Asband, called patriot for no cause  
But that they catch at popular applause," etc.;

also *ib.* 83, 84. Similarly, Johnson in his Dictionary defined *patriot* as "sometimes used for a factious disturber of the Government." For Cowper's political views, see note to ll. 60-63.

50. *folio*. A *folio* volume is made up of sheets once folded, so that each sheet forms two leaves. Cowper uses the word playfully of his newspaper, which was a single sheet so folded, comprising four pages. This was the ordinary size of newspapers in Cowper's day, the number then issued being 79. At the accession of George the Third in 1760, the impulse which Pitt had given to the national spirit, and the rise of a keener interest in politics, was fast raising the press into an intellectual and political power. Not only was the number of London newspapers rapidly increasing, but journals were being established in almost every considerable town. In 1785 was first published *The Daily Universal Register*, which became *The Times* in 1788. (See Green's *History of the English People*, vol. iv., p. 210.)

happy work! Cowper, as an author, is in sympathy with the thought that here is one literary work at least that is exempt from criticism. Cf., however, his own characterization of the Press in *The Progress of Error*, 460-469.

51, 52. holds *Inquisitive* attention, commands my attention, eager for the news it contains.

53. the fair. Mrs. Unwin and Lady Austen.

54. Though eloquent themselves—a compliment with perhaps a touch of playful irony in it. That the ladies were good talkers is implied in l. 174 *et seq.*

55. a map. Cowper compares his newspaper and its contents to a survey map, in which the physical features of a district are delineated. Thus, the lists of honours or appointments are the mountain chains, the elegant orations are the brooks and rivers, the violent harangues are the cataracts, obscure circumlocution is the forests, the witty speeches are the fields, and the advertisements and news paragraphs are the wilderness or jungle. Cf. *Letters, To Umbin*, March 7, 1782: "What a medley are our public prints; half the page filled with the ruin of the country, and the other half filled with the vices and pleasures of it;—here an island taken, and there a new comedy;—here an empire lost, and there an Italian Opera, or the Duke of Gloucester's rout on a Sunday!"

57. ridge. Honour and emolument are typified by a rocky height. Cf. Beattie, *Minstrel*, i. 1, 2:—

"Ah! who can tell how hard it is to climb

The steep where Fame's proud temple shines afar?"

Similarly, among the themes of the *Newspaper*, Crabbe includes

"Promotion's ladder who goes up or down."

58. ambition, i.e., 'the ambitious man'—abstract for concrete.

59. The seals of office. Thus the Great Seal is held by the Lord Chancellor, and the Privy Seal is in the custody of the Lord

Privy Seal, the fifth great officer of state. The expression does violence somewhat to the metaphor.

60-63. he grasps them .. in his turn. The allusion is perhaps to the short-lived Shelburne administration which came into power in 1782, but in February, 1783, was upset by a coalition between Fox and Lord North. The Coalition Ministry, which included Fox and Burke, was in its turn dismissed in December, 1783. Cowper was an "old Whig," moderate, constitutional, and anti-democratic; his conservatism took alarm at the politics of the Fox and Burke school.

64, 65. in soft Meanders, gently winding along. *Meander* is derived from *Mæander*, a very tortuous river in Asia Minor. Other words derived from proper names are: *dunce*, *tawdry*, *tantalize*, *copper*, *bayonet*, *calico*, *martinet*, *boycott*, etc.

65. lubricate the course they take, 'make a smooth and easy way for themselves.' The speaker soothes and flatters his audience, and so makes them ready to listen to him.

66-69. The modest speaker ... conceives. Cowper quotes from his newspaper the opening sentence of the oily orator's speech. "Modest" is ironical. For Cowper's satire, see Introduction, pp. xxvii.-xxix.

67. engross, 'monopolize,' from *gross*, Fr. *grôs*, 'fat, big,' with prefix *en-*.

68. a propitious ear, a friendly hearing.

70. Sweet bashfulness! said, of course, ironically.

this praise, etc., the praise of truth. The "modest speaker's" depreciation of himself in his opening remarks is borne out by the ignorance and folly of his subsequent speech.

73. Cataracts of declamation. So one of the demagogues in the *Knights* of Aristophanes is mentioned as *Κυκλοβόρος* *φωνή* *ἔχει*, 'having the voice of Cycloborus' (a mountain torrent near Athens); and Juvenal (x. 126) describes Demosthenes as *torrentem*, 'pouring forth a torrent of speech.'

74. no meaning = unmeaningness, nonsense. spread = over-spread.

75. In which ... lost, 'in which nothing intelligible can be discovered.' The antecedent of *which* is *forest*.

77. descants, comments. *Descant* (Lat. *dis-*, apart, and *cantus*, song) is literally a song or piece of music written in parts. Milton (*Par. Lost*, iv. 603) uses it of the nightingale's strain:—

"She all night long her ambrous descant sung."

79-83. roses for the cheeks ... Olympian dews. The newspaper also has advertisements of cosmetics to give bloom to the cheeks and whiteness and smoothness to the brows, of artificial teeth

and hair, of elixirs whose ingredients are drawn, or said to be drawn, from all parts of the universe, under all manner of grand names. Cowper devotes a long letter (*To Unwin*, May 3, 1784), to a consideration of the subject of face-painting; and that the practice was common among fashionable ladies in his day is shown by his assuring the same correspondent (July 3, 1786) that Lady Hesketh's "complexion is not at all indebted to art."

83. *Nectareous essences, Olympian dews.* The newspaper advertisements were probably headed "Essence of Nectar," "Olympian Dew," or "Dew of Olympus"—~~the fine titles of sundry pastes and washes which were to make people "beautiful for ever."~~ With ll. 79-83 compare the "gay perfumer's" advertisements in Crabbe's *Newspaper*, 366-375:—

"Come, faded belles, who would your youth renew,  
And learn the wonders of Olympian dew;  
Restore the roses that begin to faint,  
Nor think celestial washes vulgar paint;

"Come, batter'd beaux, whose locks are turn'd to gray,  
And crop Discretion's lying badge away;  
Read where they vend these smart engaging things,  
These flaxen frontlets with elastic springs."

Nectar was the drink of the Greek gods, and Olympus was their abode, so that, at least in the naming of these cosmetics, "Heaven" was "plundered of its sweets."

64. *Sermons ... favourite airs*, preaching announcements, notices of public banquets, and advertisements of popular songs.

85. *Ethereal journeys*, 'accounts of balloon ascents.' The first balloon, filled with hot air, was constructed by Montgolfier, in which he ascended at Annonay on June 5th, 1783, causing immense interest and excitement. The first ascent in England was made by Lunardi at Moorfields, London, on Sept. 15, 1784. On Dec. 15, 1783, Cowper writes to Newton: "I know not how it fares with you, at a time when philosophy (i.e. science) has just brought forth her most extraordinary production... My mind, however, is frequently getting into these balloons, and is busy multiplying speculations as airy as the regions through which they pass." And again to Joseph Hill, Jan. 22, 1785: "Long live the inventors and improvers of balloons! It is always clear overhead, and by and by we shall use no other road." Cowper's friend and neighbour, Mr. Throckmorton, used to amuse himself by sending up fire-balloons, and invited the poet to be present at the spectacle; cf. *Letters, To Unwin*, 1783! "Balloons are so much the mode, that even in this country we have attempted a balloon," etc.

85. submarine exploits, 'accounts of diving operations.' Halley (about 1721) greatly improved the diving-bell, and is said to have been the first who, by its means, set his foot on the ground at the bottom of the sea. Smeaton (1779-88) made use of the diving-bell in improving Ramsgate harbour. In the summer of 1783, shortly before the *Task* was begun, Spalding and his assistants going down in a diving-bell in Ireland were drowned.

86. Katterfelto. A quack famous in Cowper's day. He performed electrical experiments with two black cats, which he called his devils. His advertisements were headed "Wonders! Wonders!" Hence a writer of the time speaks of him as "that wonderful wonder of all wonders," and hence Cowper (l. 87) introduces mention of his "wonders," and of him as "wondering." Crabbe, in his *Newspaper*, mentions him ("Katterfelto's skill") among "the advertising tribe."

with his hair on end. A sign of terror. The poet is speaking ironically. So the Ghost in *Hamlet* (i. v. 19) says the horror of his tale could make "each particular hair to stand on end."

87. wondering for his bread, 'earning his living by his pretended astonishment at his own wonderful performance'; see note to l. 86 above.

88. the loopholes of retreat. Cowper pictures himself as in a fortress or castle, through the loopholes of which he can safely look out upon the outside world. Cf. *Letters, To Lady Hesketh*, Sept. 29, 1787: "Retired as we are, and seemingly excluded from the world, we are not indifferent to what passes in it; on the contrary the arrival of a newspaper ... never fails to furnish us with a theme for discussion."

89. to see the stir, etc. Cf. ll. 308-310 below, and *Truth*, 253, 254:—

"Think with what pleasure, safe and at his ease,  
He hears the tempest howling in the trees."

And *Lucretius*, ii. 1, 2:—

*Suave mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis  
E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;*

"'Tis pleasant when the winds are tossing the ocean waves, to gaze at the peril of others from the safe vantage of the land.' Cowper vindicates the morality of such a feeling in ll. 336-340 below.

90. the great Babel, the outer world with its noise and confusion. *Babel* is a Hebrew word meaning 'confusion,' and was the name given to the city built by Noah's descendants, "because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth" (Bible, *Genesis*, xi. 9).

92. dying, faint, because heard at a distance.



93. Falls a soft murmur, i.e. 'falls as a soft murmur.'

uninjured, not stunned or deafened by the noise.

95. advanced, 'lifted.' Shakspeare and Milton both use *advance* for *raise*. Cf. *Tempest*, 1 ii. 408:—

"The fringed curtains of thine eye advance";

and *Par. Lost*, i. 536, 537:—

"Th' imperial ensign, which full high advanc'd  
Shone like a meteor streaming to the wind."

96. more than mortal. I look down, like a god, upon human concerns without having anything to do with them. Cowper probably had the gods of Epicurus in his mind, mentioned in Bk. v. 876-878:—

"Gods that sleep,  
Or disregard our follies, or that sit  
Amused spectators of this bustling stage."

98. It turns. The globe turns, as it were, on its axle before my eyes.

99. generations, nations, peoples.

103. that make man a wolf to man, that cause men to destroy one another. Cf. Plautus, *Asinaria*, ii. 4: *Lupus homini homo, non homo, quum qualis sit non novit*, "Man is a wolf to man, not a man, when he is a stranger to him." *Make* is a better reading than *makes*, the reading of the second edition.

104. those brazen throats, the war trumpets. Cf. Milton, *Par. Lost*, xi. 713:—

"The brazen throat of war had ceased to roar";

and Homer's *βρα χυλκρον*, 'brazen voice' (*Iliad*, xviii. 222), and Vergil's *ferrea vox*, 'iron voice' (*Georgics*, ii. 44).

105. the language of his heart. The harsh-sounding trumpets fitly express his harsh and cruel feelings.

107. expatiates, 'walks abroad', 'ranges at large.' The meaning of the Latin verb *expatiari* is 'to leave the proper course,' 'to go out of the beaten track.' So Milton (*Par. Lost*, i. 774) makes his bees

"on the smoothed plank  
expatiate and confer

Their state affairs."

And "Let us," writes Pope, *Essay on Man*, i. 5,

"Expatiate free o'er all this scene of man."

Cf. also *Letters*, To Lady Hesketh, Nov. 27, 1787: "Though I have now been an inhabitant of this village a twelvemonth, and have during the half of that time been at liberty to *expatiate*, and to make discoveries, I am daily finding out fresh scenes and

walks." See Introduction, p. xxx. The word is now confined to the metaphorical sense of 'to enlarge upon.' He = man, or the busy outside world.

109. polley, civil constitution, government.

111. sucks intelligence, gathers information. The word *sucks* is in keeping with the simile of the bee (l. 107); so with "spreads the honey" in the next line.

112. the honey of his deep research = 'the honey, namely his deep research.' *Of* is appositional, as in 'The city of London.' "His deep research" is the interesting and valuable discoveries of travellers and voyagers.

114. He travels, and I too, etc. Cf. *Letters, To Newton*, Oct. 6, 1783: "I am much obliged to you for the voyages, which I received and began to read last night. My imagination is so captivated upon these occasions, that I seem to partake with the navigators in all the dangers they encountered. I lose my anchor; my mainsail is rent into shreds; I kill a shark, and by signs converse with a Patagonian, and all this without moving from my fireside. The principal fruits of these circuits, that have been made round the globe, seem likely to be the amusement of those that staid at home." And *To Newton*, June 21, 1784: "I charged him with a petition to Lord Dartmouth, to send me Cook's last voyage, which I have a great curiosity to see... I dare say I shall obtain the favour, and have great pleasure in taking my last trip with a voyager whose memory I respect so much." The *Letters* contain frequent similar references to books of travel. See note to l. 140.

116. with a kindred heart, 'with feelings like his, in full sympathy with him.' Cf. l. 321 below.

118, 119. While fancy ... home. The poet's imagination makes the round of the voyages that he reads about, while still remaining at home with him; just as the hand of a clock travels round the face, while at the same time fixed on its central pivot. For a similar image, cf. Ben Jonson, *Epistle to Selden* :—

"You have been  
Ever at home, yet have all countries seen;  
And like a compass, keeping one foot still  
Upon your centre, to your circle fill  
Of general knowledge."

still = constantly, all the while.

120. the inverted year, the year when it has reached the lowest point in its revolution. Cf. Lowell, *My Study Windows*; "Cowper had been reading Thomson, and 'the inverted year' pleased his fancy with its suggestion of that starry wheel of the

zodiac moving round through its spaces infinite." The expression occurs in Thomson's *Winter*, 43 :—

"And fierce Aquarius stains the inverted year,"

which is itself a translation of Horace, *Satires*, i. i. 36 : *simul inversum contristat Aquarius annum*. Cf. Wordsworth, *The Longest Day*, 29-32 :—

"Summer ebbs ;— each day that follows  
Is a reflux from on high,  
Tending to the darksome hollows  
Where the frosts of winter lie."

For ruler, cf. Thomson, *Winter*, 1 :—

"See Winter comes to rule the varied year" ;

And *ib.*, 1024 :—

"'Tis done ! stern Winter spreads his latest glooms,  
And reigns tremendous o'er the conquer'd year."

121-127. **Thy scattered hair ... slippery way.** Winter is personified as "ruler of the year." All these are absolute clauses.

121. **scattered**, dishevelled.

Like ashes, cf. Bible, *Psalms*, cxlvii. 16, "He giveth snow like wool : he scattereth the hoar frost like ashes."

123, 124. **made white ... age**, not hoary (with old age, but white with actual snow. The "snows of age" for "hoary hair" is a common poetical expression.

126. **A sliding car ... wheels**, a sledge, which needs no wheels to bear it along. "Implebted to" occurs again in l. 543.

129, 130. **Thou hold'st the sun ... undawning east.** Winter is represented as keeping the sun imprisoned, as it were, in the east, where the day is long delayed. *Undawning*, 'showing no signs of dawn.' The word seems to be of Cowper's coinage.

131. **Shortening ... noon.** Because in winter, especially in a northern country like England, the sun's altitude at noon is much diminished.

134. **Compensating.** Observe the accentuation—*compensating* instead of the more usual *compensating*. The usage recurs in ll. 434, 768 below, and is common in poetry ; cf. Wordsworth, *Excursion*, iii. :—

"And be in part compensated. For rights," etc. ;

Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, iv. 245 :—

"If so they might compensate the saved sin" ;

Tennyson, *Enoch Arden*, 249 :—

"To barter, nor compensating the want."

Cowper has also *empirics* for *enuptrics* (Bk. ii. 352), and *cément* for *cement* (Bk. v. 147).

134. his loss, the loss or absence of the sun.

136. gathering at short notice. In winter the members of a family, scattered during the day at their various occupations, readily and naturally collect round the fireside. "At short notice" seems to mean that little or no previous arrangement is necessary for this meeting.

137, 138. fixing thought ... cares. The long winter evenings are favourable to the concentration of thought and attention, which are dissipated and distracted by the engagements and business of daylight.

139. intimate delights, inner or home pleasures.

140. Fireside enjoyments. Cf. *Letters, To Hill*, Oct. 20, 1783: "I see the winter approaching without much concern, though a passionate lover of fine weather and the pleasant scenes of summer; but the long evenings have their comforts too, and there is hardly to be found upon the earth, I suppose, so snug a creature as an Englishman by his fireside in the winter. ... I have two ladies to read to, sometimes more, but never less. At present we are circumnavigating the globe," etc.

141, 142. the lowly roof ... retirement, humble dwellers in quiet seclusion, like himself.

144-149. No rattling wheels ... quake. In the gay world of society, the carriage full of guests drives up to the door; the footman gives a sounding knock that echoes down the street; the guests enter and inconsiderately leave their horses to stand outside in the cold, while they and their friends meet a bored and fashionable party. Cf. *Tirocinium*, 743-748:—

"Or hast thou a polite, card-playing wife,  
Chained to the routs that she frequents for life;  
Who just when industry begins to snore,  
Flies, winged with joy, to some coach-crowded door;  
• And thrice in every winter throngs thine own  
With half the chariots and sedans in town."

144. short, abruptly. *Short* here is an adverb; cf. 'to work hard,' 'to walk straight,' 'to drink deep,' etc. Cf. ll. 305, 343, 344.

145. powdered pert, 'saucy footman with powdered hair.' *Pert* (a Keltic word) is an adjective used as a noun: cf. 'an innocent,' 'a rough,' 'a modern,' etc.

146. sounding an alarm, making a loud knocking to rouse the inmates. *Alarm* (see note to l. 569) is to be parsed as a partially cognate object of the verb *sound*. • It is not cognate in form, and only partially cognate in meaning; thus, *sounding an alarm* = 'sounding an alarming sound.' "*Cough* their own knell," below, l. 148, is another instance. Cf. also 'to shout applause,' 'to look daggers,' 'to rain fire and brimstone.'

148. Cough their own knell, cough a cough that is a sound of doom to them. The horses' cough is their own death-knell, a sign that they will probably die of cold. For the parsing of *knell*, see note to l. 146 above.

heedless of the sound, i.e. careless of the sufferings of their horses. Cf. ll. 371-373 below.

149. The silent ... quake. The party are silent because they are dull and have no topics of conversation; and they fan themselves because it is fashionable, though they are shivering all the time. *Quake* is used again in the sense of 'shiver' in l. 386. Cf. *Shakspere, Cymbeline*, II. iv. 5, 6 :—

"Quake in the present winter state and wish  
That warmer days would come."

For *silent*, cf. the sketch of fashionable life in *Hope*, 103, 104 :—

"While conversation, an exhausted stock,  
Grows drowsy, as the clicking of a clock."

And *Conversation*, 379 :—

"The circle formed, we sit in silent state," etc.

151. The pattern grows, etc. One of the ladies is occupied in embroidering a flower, copied from a pattern, on lawn; and, as she works, the different parts of the plant gradually disclose themselves. The pattern = 'the copy of the pattern.' Cf. the "needlework sublime" in Bk. i. 35, 36 :—

"There might you see the peony spread wide,  
The full-blown rose," etc.

152. lawn, a fine linen material. The word is a doublet of *linen*, from Lat. *linum*, flax.

156. A wreath. *Wreath* is in apposition with "buds, and leaves," etc.

156, 157. of flowers that blow ... decay. Because there is more time and opportunity for such embroidery in winter, a season when natural flowers are withered.

159. Made vocal, read aloud. Cowper was the reader, as Lady Austen was the musician, the "lyre" being that lady's guitar. Cf. *Letters, To Newton*, March 19, 1784: "My evenings are devoted to books. I read aloud for the entertainment of the party, thus making amends by a vociferation of two hours for my silence at other times." The *Letters* contain frequent references to this practice; see note to l. 140.

161. The touch, i.e. the touch of the player's fingers.

shakes out, produces by shaking or vibrating the strings.

163. symphonious, yet distinct, 'in harmony with the music, and yet distinct from it.' The voice is not lost in the music.

163. charming strife. The voice and the lyre are represented as rivalling each other, which shall be heard best; and the strife, or contest, between them is charming because of its delightful effects. For the oxymoron, cf. Horace's (*Epist.* i. 12, 19) *Concordia discors*, 'discordant concord,' the "jarring concord" of Shaks. *All's Well that Ends Well*, i. i. 186.

164. Begule the night, make it pass quickly and pleasantly. Cf. Bk. iii. 362, 363: "Happy to deceive the time, Not waste it"; and *Epistle to Joseph Hill*, 4, 5: "We were wont to cheat A tedious hour"; and the Latin *fallere noctem*, 'to deceive the night.'

165. threaded steel, a "poetical" periphrasis for "needle," like Pope's "glittering forfex" for "scissors," or "China's earth" for "coffee-cups" (*Rage of the Lock*, ll. 148, 110). See note to l. 20, 21.

167. The volume closed, an absolute clause.

rites, 'order, procedure'; a playful use of the word.

168. the last meal, supper.

A Roman meal, the simple meal of old Roman republican times, described by Juvenal, *Satires*, xi. 56, etc.

170. her patriots. Such as Curius Dentatus, whom the Samnite ambassadors found boiling vegetables in an earthen pot, or Fabricius, on whose table the only silver plate was a small salt-cellar.

172. domestic, near the house.

173. a radish and an egg, the "plain living" which Wordsworth (*Sonnet, Sept. 1802*) regrets the loss of. Cf. Pope, *Satires*, ii. 35, 36:—

"Cheap eggs, and herbs, and olives still we see;  
Thus much is left of old simplicity!"

*Radish* is from Lat. *radicem*, a root; so Pope, *ib.* 32: "Humbly live on rabbits and on roots."

174. Discourse, 'conversation'—in contrast to the *silence* of the fashionable circle in l. 149.

180. Start at His awful name, feel shocked or surprised at the introduction of His name into conversation. Cf. *Conversation*, 467-474, where Cowper says that it is "an unalterable fixed decree that God and his attributes

"Be never named in ears esteemed polite."

In a letter to Lady Hesketh, April 3, 1786, however, he modifies his view on this point: "Pulpits for preaching, and the parlour, the garden, and the walk for friendly and agreeable conversation."

181. **Themes** is a nominative without any following verb (*nominativus pendens*), unless the comma is omitted after *tone*, when "themes exciting" becomes an absolute clause. *Tone* = character.

183. retrace with memory's pointing wand, recall by the aid of memory, which, as it were, points them out to us.

185. '**scaped**, for *escaped*. Cf. Shakspeare, *Merchant of Venice*, II. ii. 148, 150: "To 'scape drowning thrice ... here are simple *scapes*." Milton has the verb *escape* frequently and the noun *escape* once (*Par. Reg.* II. 189); and cf. *scapegoat*, *scapegrace*.

the broken snare. *Snare* is often used in the Bible for an attempt to entrap a man into wrong-doing. Cf. *Psalms*, cix. 110: "The wicked have laid a snare for me"; and *ib.* cxxiv. 7: "Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped."

189. "O evenings worthy of the gods!" Cf. Horace, *Satires*, II. vi. 65: *O noctes cœnæque deum!* "O evenings and feasts (worthy) of the gods!"

190. The Sabine bard, Horace, so called after his little farm in the Sabine district, to which he is fond of referring in his poems; see his *Odes*, II. xviii. 14; III. i. 48, etc. Cf. *Letters*, To Unwin, July 3, 1784: "I may go to school again, and refresh my spirit by a little intercourse with the Mantuan and the Sabine bard."

I reply, i.e. I reply to Horace. Similarly in the next line, *yours* = Horace's.

192. As more ... truths, since they are enlightened by the truths of Christianity, which Horace's were not.

194. Is Winter hideous, etc. Cf. *Letters*, To Lady Hesketh, Nov. 3, 1787: "I have said it in verse, and I think it in prose, that as it (the country) is at all times preferable to the town, so is it especially preferable in winter."

in a garb like this, i.e. spent as I have described.

195. the tragic fur, the acting of tragedies on the stage. Kings and queens in tragedies would be represented in ermine robes.

196. The pent-up ... throng. Cf. II. 42-45.

197. To thaw him into feeling, to relieve his dulness.

198. flippant wits, peft writers. Cowper has perhaps Sheridan in his mind, a dramatist remarkable for his witty dialogue and clever repartee. His three comedies of *The Rivals*, *The School for Scandal*, and *The Critic*, were produced between 1775 and 1779. Cf. introduction, pp. xxviii., xix.

199. to prompt him with a smile, to induce him to be cheerful. The word *prompt* has an underlying sense of the artificiality of the cheerfulness so produced.

201. *sidelong* is formed from *side* by the old adverbial suffix *-ling* or *-long*. The older form was *sideling*. Cf. *darkling*, *headlong*, *flailong*. *Stealing a glance* = 'glancing a stolen glance'; see note to l. 146.

203. As if... them all, as though the audience were so many puppets, all of whose faces could be acted upon by moving a single spring. *Master spring* is the principal spring in a piece of machinery which sets the whole mechanism in motion. Cf. *master-key*.

207. Cards were superfluous here. Cf. *Letters, To Mrs. Cowper*, Oct. 20, 1766: "As to amusements—I mean what the world calls such—we have none; the place, indeed, swarms with them, and cards and dancing are the professed business of almost all the gentle inhabitants of Huntingdon." Card-playing is satirized in Bk. i. 472-477. *Were* = would be.

tricks, cunning devices.

209. *unfurnished*, empty. Cf. *The Valediction*, 9: "Your brain well furnished"; and *The Progress of Error*, 425:—

"Hence an unfurnished and a listless mind."

And *Letters, To Unwin*, July 27, 1780: "First came the barber; who, after having embellished the outside of my head, has left the inside just as unfurnished as he found it."

210. To palliate dulness, to mitigate, lessen it. The word is generally used in the sense of 'to excuse,' as in 'to palliate a fault.' Cf. *Table Talk*, 742:—

"The tedium that the lazy rich endure."

give time a shove, 'make time pass more quickly.' Cowper uses this somewhat undignified word in *Expostulation*, 376:—

"Hast thou, by statute, shoved from its destined  
The Saviour's feast," etc.

211, 212. *has a dove's wing... sound*, i.e. 'Time, with us, passes innocently, quickly, and peacefully.' The sound of this line, with its alliterative sibilance, echoes the sense. *Silken*, soft, gentle. So Scott (*Lay of the Last Minstrel*, v. 13) calls Love a "silken tie." For the image, cf. *Retirement*, 799, 800:—

"These, these are arts pursued without a crime,  
That leave no stain upon the wing of Time";

and W. R. Spencer:—

"Ah, who to sober measurement  
Time's happy fleetness brings,  
When birds of paradise have lent  
Their plumage for his wings?"



And Shakspeare, *Richard III.*, v. ii. 23 :—

“ True hope is swift, and flies with swallow’s wings.”

213. the world’s Time is Time in masquerade, ‘Time, as spent by worldly people, is Time drest up in disguise,’ i.e. devoted to frivolous and artificial amusements. The poet pictures the world’s Time as wearing wings quite the reverse of a dove’s, decked with the variegated feathers of a peacock; only, in place of the “eyes” that adorn the peacock’s plumage, its feathers are coloured with the devices of the four suits of cards. For “eyes,” cf. *On Mrs. Montagu’s Feather hangings*, 3, 4 :—

“ The Peacock sends his heavenly dyes,  
His rainbows and his starry eyes.”

216. black and red. Diamonds and Hearts are red (“ensanguined hearts,” l. 218); Clubs and Spades are black.

218. Ensanguined, blood-stained, blood-red. The red colour of the suit of hearts is pointed to as emblematic of bloodshed. Cowper was perhaps thinking of duelling, a common result of gambling at cards in his day. Clubs and spades have a similar emblematic part assigned them. The word *ensanguined* occurs in Milton (*Par. Lost*, xi. 654).

220-222. What should be — scythe. Cowper still refers to the conventional representation of Time as an old man with wings (denoting its swiftness) carrying an hour-glass (marking the passage of time) and a scythe (emblematic of its destructiveness). In the case of worldly people, he says, Time’s hour-glass is turned into a dice-box (their shapes are similar), and his scythe is represented by a billiard cue, which, from a moral point of view, is equally destructive. *Mss* is the reading of all the editions to 1806; the edition of 1808 has the more modern *mace*. Cowper attacks the game of billiards again in Bk. vi. 272-277.

226. at whose age; of an age at which.

227. The backstring, the pinafore.

228, 229. sit pupils .. Time, learn to play cards from their elders, who spend all their time at the game. Some editions have *fit* for *sit*; the “long s” (f) of the old script would help the corruption.

231. every trick, all the artifices or ingenuities of the game.

232. truce with censure = let there be a truce with censure; I put a stop to my censure.

Roving, taking up many topics, one after another.

237. it, i.e. his description of it.

239. pallet spread. *Pallet* in this sense is usually spelt *palette*. It is best to omit the comma (of some editions) after *spread*, and take the words *spread with colours* together. The poet represents himself as a painter.

240. for a far different use. His intention was to describe the pleasures of a winter evening, whereas he wanders off into speculations on card-playing or anything else that takes his fancy. Cf. Introduction, p. xxv.

241. dolls, puppets. Such as the masquerading figure of Time above.

idle, vain, foolish.

243-258. Compare with this invocation Collins's *Ode to Evening*, which Cowper seems to have had in his mind when he wrote these lines.

243. once again. Referring to l. 41 above.

245. in the streaky west, because evening comes at sunset. Cf. Milton, *Comus*, 190, where "the grey-hooded Even" is represented as rising "from the hindmost wheels of Phœbus' wain."

246. With matron step, with dignified pace, not skipping along like a girl. *Stoic* is an adverb.

247. Treads on. Because she follows close behind evening.

train, 'trailing robe,' from Fr. *train*, contracted from *tragimen*, derived from *trahere* = Lat. *trahere*, to draw. Cf. l. 552, and Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 33, 34:—

"All in a robe of darkest grain,  
Flowing with majestic train."

one hand employed, an absolute clause, as is also "the other charged" below, l. 249. Cf. Collins, *To Evening*, st. 10:—

"O'er all  
Thy dowy fingers draw  
The gradual dusky veil."

248, 249. In letting fall ... beast. Cf. Milton's description of the coming on of evening, *Par. Lost*, iv. 600-603:—

• "Silence accompanied, for beast and bird,  
They to their grassy couch, these to their nests  
Were slunk."

249. charged with, containing; cf. l. 8.

251. nor needing. *Nor* is a better reading than the *not* of some editions.

252. homely-featured, plain-faced. Cf. Milton, *Comus*, 748, 749:—

"It is for homely features to keep home,  
That had their name there."

255-259. not worn indeed on high ... ample round. At evening the full moon is not high up in the heavens, but near the horizon ("the purple zone"), where it is less bright, but appears larger, because it is seen through so much more of the earth's atmosphere.

261. **gentler**, i.e. more peaceful than those of the day.

263. **nets**, to cover fruit-trees with, and so keep off the birds.

264. **twining**... **reels**. Cf. *Letters, To Unwin*, Jan. 19, 1783: "In the morning I walk with one or other of the ladies, and in the afternoon wind thread. Thus did Hercules, and thus probably did Samson, and thus do I; and were both those heroes living, I should not fear to challenge them to a trial of skill in that business, or doubt to beat them both." And *To Newton*, March 29, 1784: "We were sitting yesterday after dinner—the two ladies and myself—very composedly, in our snug parlour, one lady knitting, the other netting, and the gentleman winding worsted."

265. **When they command ... please**, i.e. the ladies—a playful description.

267. **drawing-rooms**. This word is a curtailed form of *with-drawing-room*, a room to withdraw into from the dining-room. Cf. *wig* for *perwig*, *sport* for *disport*.

269, 270. **he of Gath, Goliath**, the Philistine giant who defied the armies of Israel and was slain by David. Gath was a chief city of Philistia. See Bible, *1 Samuel*, xvii. 4 *et seq.* The reading was *Goliath* in the first four editions. For the construction, cf. l. 481 below.

271. **towering crest and all**, including the towering crest or plume on his helmet. *And all* is a common phrase used to emphasize the fact that some object or objects is to be included with the rest.

\* 272-281. With this passage compare Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 77-80:—

"Or if the air will not permit,

Some still removed place will fit,

Where glowing embers through the room

Each light to counterfeit a gloom."

275. **shadow**. "A better reading than the *shadows* of some editions.

276. **uncouthly**, awkwardly, clumsily. *Uncouth* (from *un-*, not, and *couth*, p. p. of O. E. *cunnan*, to know) means (1) 'unfamiliar,' and so (2) 'strange, odd,' and (3) 'awkward.'

to. For this *to*, cf. l. 27 and note.

278. **parlour**, from Fr. *parler*, to speak, was originally a room (in a monastery) where *talking was allowed*. Cf. *parliament*, *parley*, *parlance*.

281. **Pregnant**, occupied, possessed.

281. **Laugh ye**, i.e. you may laugh at me; I don't mind your derision.

282. **mercurial**, lively, sprightly. • It was originally an astrological term, denoting one born when the planet Mercury was in the ascendant (cf.  *jovial, saturnine*) ; hence, says Cotgrave, "humourous, fantastical; also, crafty, subtle, deceitful, thievish." Thus, the rogue Autolycus (Shaks. *Winter's Tale*, iv. iii. 25) was "littered under Mercury," the versatile, thievish god of antiquity.

283. **a stupor**, a sense of dulness ; a suspension of intellectual activity. Cf. l. 299.

284. **I am conscious**, etc., i.e. I am conscious (of), and confess (to having) a soul, etc.

285. **that does not always think**. Cf. *Letters, To Newton*, Oct. 9, 1784 : "I can ... assert with the strictest truth that I not only do not think with connexion, but that I frequently do not think at all. I am much mistaken if I do not often catch myself napping in this way ; for when I ask myself what was the last idea (as the ushers at Westminster ask an idle boy what was the last word), I am not able to answer, but, like the boy in question, am obliged to stare and say nothing." Cf. also Wordsworth, *Personal Talk*, i. 9-14 :—

" Better than such discourse doth silence long,  
Long, barren silence, square with my desire ;  
To sit without emotion, hope, or aim,  
In the loved presence of my cottage-fire,  
And listen to the flapping of the flame,  
Or kettle whispering its faint unglorions."

285-290. As he gazes into the fire, to his fancy the red cinders take the shapes of houses, towers, trees, etc.

287. **a waking dream**. Cf. *Letters, To Unwin*, 1786 : "No manufacturer of waking dreams ever succeeded better in his employment than I do. I can weave such a piece of tapestry in a few minutes," etc.

292. **play, move to and fro**.

293, 294. **foreboding ... prophesying**. "In the view of superstition" is to be taken with "foreboding" which agrees with "films." "Prophesying" agrees with "I" (l. 291). Threads of soot, hanging from the bars of the grate, were, according to the popular superstition, supposed to indicate the near arrival of a stranger.

299. **the mood lethargic**, the "stupor" of l. 283.

**a mask**, an outward show.

300. **as** = 'as if.' Cf. l. 479 below. *As* was used in older English without *if*, because the *if* was implied in the subjunctive. Latterly the subjunctive, falling into disuse, was felt to be too

weak unaided to express the hypothesis, and *if* was inserted (Abbott, *Shaks. Gr.* § 102, 103, 107).

301. *lost*, plunged in thought.

302. *reclined*. The past participle is used instead of the present, *reclining*, in order to denote a state. Thus, "a travelled man" is one who is in the state or position of having travelled much. So Wordsworth, *Man and Nature*, 2: "While in a grove I sat *reclined*." Cf. l. 660 and note, and Bk. v. 51: "Chains are the portion of *revolled* man."

305. *recollected*, i.e. re-collected, re-gathered. Cf. Milton, *Par. Lost*, i. 527, 528:—

"He his wonted pride

Soon recollecting."

And *ib.* ix. 471: "Fierce hate he recollects"; also Shaks. *Pericles*, ii. i. 53-55:—

"These fishers . . . .  
from their watery empire recollect  
All that may men approve or men detect."

*short*. See l. 144 and note.

306. *glassy*, i.e. bright and attractive, but frail.

307. *brittle toys, trifles of the moment*. *Toys* is the reading of the earlier editions: later ones have *toils* (nets to entangle the intellect), probably as in better keeping with *threads* and *weaves* above. Cf. note to l. 287, and *Retirement*, 639, where Cowper calls reveries

"Those limsy webs that break as soon as wrought."

308. *recess*, place of seclusion; my snug parlour.

309, 310. *emend* The silence, etc. Cf. l. 89 and note.

312. *A variegated show*. At evening the face of nature was of various colours: faded green (ll. 312, 313), mellow brown (l. 314), bright green (l. 317), and sable or dark (l. 320). *Variegated* is opposed to *assimilate all objects* (l. 329); the snow-fall makes all a uniform white.

315. *the forceful share*, the powerful ploughshare. The fields where corn had been grown had lately been ploughed up.

316. *fallows*, fallow land; land left untilled, and so overgrown with weeds.

321. *kindred*, similar; resembling the dark hue of the groves. Cf. l. 116 above.

326. *fleecy*. Because flakes of snow resemble tufts of wool. Cf. note to l. 121.

327. *lapse*, downfall, smooth descent; from Lat. *labor*, *lapsus*, I slide, slip. In prose the word is generally used of (1) a moral fall, a fault; (2) a gliding away or passing, as of time.

329. **Assimilate all objects**, i.e. assimilate them to one another, make them all alike; cf. note to l. 312.

332. **so warm a veil**. It is well known that the covering of snow preserves plants, etc., from the injurious effects of frost.

334, 335. **or, if found ... side**. If the blooming flower of happiness is found, it is sure to have some thistle of sorrow growing beside it. Cf. Lucretius, iv. 1126-7:—

*Medio de fonte leporum*

*Surgit amari aliquid quod in ipsis floribus angit;*

'From the midst of the fount of our delights something bitter rises, that pains us even among the flowers.' For *thistly* sorrow, cf. the *spinosa curas*, 'thorny cares,' of Catullus, 62, 72.

336-340. It is a wise and innocent practice to compare our own lot in life with the less happy lot of others (such as the traveller and the waggoner below), if we do so (not in a spirit of pride at our own superiority, but) that we may teach ourselves patience and sympathy for others. Cf. note to l. 89 above.

337. **the law of love**, the Christian rule that bids us love one another.

338. **With less distinguished**, i.e. with those who are less distinguished.

341. **he that stalks**, etc., the waggoner. The verb points to the *slowness* of his stride through the snow.

342. **reeking**, smoking, steaming.

343. **wain** is an abbreviated form of *waggon* (O.E. *waegen*, *waen*).

**goes heavily**. Cf. Bible, *Exodus*, xiv. 24, 25: "The Lord ... troubled the host of the Egyptians, and took off their chariot wheels, that they drave them heavily" (the marginal reading is, "made them to go heavily").

**sore**, very much. *Sore* is an adverb here, as *also* *close*, l. 344 below; cf. note to l. 144.

344. **congregated loads**, accumulated masses of snow. For Cowper's long-wordedness, see Introduction, p. xxx.

**close**. See note to l. 343 above.

349. **consolidated**, i.e. into ice. See Introduction, p. xxx.

350. **jutting**, projecting.

351. **The pelting brunt**, 'the driving snow-storm.' *Brunt* is from the same root as *burn*, and so strictly means 'heat,' and then 'shock, violence.'

352. **puckered**, 'gathered into wrinkles.' *Pucker* is literally to make full of lines and folds, like a *bag*, from *poke*, a bag (cf. *pocket*, *pouch*). The man puckers his cheeks, and so draws his

lips away from his teeth, as a kind of defence against the weather. Cf. Tennyson, *Aylmer's Field*, 723, 724: "Browns ... that knit themselves for summer shadow"; and Wordsworth, *Peter Bell*, Part I.: "His forehead wrinkled was ... by knitting of his brow Beneath the glaring sun."

354. **secures his hat**, keeps it from being blown off his head.

355. **length of whip**, his whip with its long lash.

356. **Resounding oft**. He brandishes his whip in order to make it "crack," that the sound may urge on his horses ("never heard in vain").

357-359. **in my account ... thou**. You are thrice (*i.e.* very) happy in my opinion, because you have not that sensitiveness to pain which refined natures possess. *In my account* = according to my reckoning.

362, 363. **The learned finger ... pulse**. "The physician's finger never need feel your pulse; you are too healthy ever to require a doctor's services." *Explore* = examine. For this use of the word cf. Pope, *Prologue to Satires*, 412:—

"Explore the thought, explain the asking eye."

363. **the unhealthful east**, *i.e.* east wind. Cf. *Letters, To Mrs. Newton*, June, 1780: "I have had several indifferent nights, and the wind is easterly; two circumstances so unfavourable to me in all my occupations," etc. And *To Lady Hesketh*, June 3, 1788: "Then came an east wind, baneful to me at all times."

364. **That breathes the spleen**, that is productive of melancholy and ill-humour. The spleen was supposed to be the seat of irritability and despondency. Cf. Sir W. Temple, *Essay on Poetry*: "Our country must be confessed to be what a great foreign physician calls it—the region of spleen." Also Bk. i. 455:—

"The spleen is seldom felt where Flora reigns."

And Bk. iii. 316-318:—

"How many self-deluded nymphs and swains,  
Who dream they have a taste for fields and groves,  
Would find them hideous nurseries of the spleen!"

**searches, penetrates.**

369. **Are** is understood before "thine helpless charge."

371-373. **which the great ... show**. Great people are not always merciful to their horses. They overdrive them with "galloping thro' public places" (Burns, *The Two Dogs*). Cf. l. 148 and note. On Cowper's tenderness for animals, see Introduction, pp. xx., xxi. For the construction—"the great ... not always show"—cf. l. 40 and note.

374. **Poor**, etc. *Yet* belongs to all four epithets: 'Those who are poor, and, in spite of their poverty, are industrious, modest,' etc.

380. **trembles**. She trembles to think how short a time it will last. *It may be in consequence of extreme cold.*

383. **nurses**, carefully tends, so as to keep them alight as long as possible.

385. **crowded knees**. Their knees are all crowded together as they crouch close round the fire.

386. **quake**. See l. 149 and note.

so they be warmed, 'provided that they are warmed.' The full construction is "if it be so that they," etc., and so seems to mean "in this way," "on these terms" (see Abbott, *Shaks. Gram.*, § 133); cf. Bk. iii. 806:—

"So he may wrap himself in honest rags."

387. **as more inured**, i.e. as being more inured, since he is more inured (and since the current in his veins is more briskly moved, etc.). *Inured*, used, hardened.

388, 389. **the current ... toil**. The blood courses more rapidly through his veins in consequence of his harder work, and so he is warmer than the others.

391, 393. **The taper ... extinguished ... and the loaf ... half eaten**. These are absolute clauses. *Taper* is "poetical" for *candle*; cf. note to ll. 20, 21.

392. **Dangled along ... end**. A vividly descriptive line. He had watched the child carrying home from the shop the farthing dip (tallow candle), held by its long wick in the cold fingers. Cf. Introduction, p. xxi.

394. **sauce, relish**. Cf. the proverb, "Hunger is the best sauce." The dry loaf is unpalatable, and so is only "half-eaten."

397. **Where penury ... chained**. Poverty is a bar to the culture and expansion of the intellect. Cf. Gray, *Elegy*, 51, 52:—

"Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul."

398. According to the Rev. A. D'Orsey, the average Dorsetshire labourer has not 300 words in his vocabulary.

399. **With all this thrift they thrive not**. Notwithstanding their frugal mode of life they do not prosper. The writer plays upon the two meanings of *thrift*: (1) the older meaning of 'prosperity', 'success'; (2) the modern meaning of 'frugality', 'economy'. For *thrift* = 'success' cf. Shaks. *Merchant of Venice*, i. i. 175, 176:—

"I have a mind presages me such thrift,  
That I should questionless be fortunate."



400. **parsimony**, 'frugality'; used in a good sense here. It generally means 'niggardliness.'

401. **inventory** properly means 'a catalogue of furniture or goods'; here it is used for 'a collection of furniture.'

402. **Skillet**, a small pot or boiler; from Old Fr. *escuellette*, a little dish; Lat. *scutella*, a salver. Shakspeare (*Othello*, i. i. 271) has the word, and cf. Johnson, *Rambler*, of Lady Bartle: "It is indeed the great business of her life to watch the skillet on the fire, to see it simmer with the due degree of heat," etc.

404. **other boast have none**. They have nothing to boast of but their independence; they can subsist without begging and that is all.

408. **rather far**. The prose order is *far rather*.

409. **A dry but independent crust**, a crust "eaten without sauce" (l. 394), but of their own providing.

411, 412. **The rugged frowns ... office**. They prefer their hard life to submitting to the ill treatment of the poor-law guardians or overseers, whose duty it is to distribute relief to the poor of the district, and who distribute it unfairly. Cf. Shaks. *Hamlet*, iii. i. 73, 74:--

"The insolence of office and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes."

For the state of things at this time, cf. Nicholls, *History of the English Poor Law*, ii. 89: "It (Gilbert's Act) commences by declaring that notwithstanding the many laws for the relief and employment of the poor, ... their sufferings and distresses are nevertheless very grievous, and that by the incapacity, negligence, or misconduct of overseers, the money raised for the relief of the poor is frequently misapplied." Dr. Burn, in his *History of the Poor Laws*, also denounces the incapacity and misconduct of overseers, and their oppression of the poor. And cf. *Letters to Lady Hesketh*, Jan. 1, 1788: "Were I asked who is the most arbitrary sovereign on earth? I should answer, neither the king of France, nor the Grand Signior, but an overseer of the poor in England," **rugged**, rough, severe. **rebuffs**. They are refused relief; see l. 418.

414. **importunity**= 'importunate persons'—abstract for concrete.

421. **Time shall give increase**, you will be better off with the lapse of time.

423. **in few years**. For 'in a few years.' Note that *few* is opposed to 'many'; *a few* is opposed to 'none.'

**shall find their hands**, shall learn to use their hands, shall become able to work. The expression is a Biblical one; see *Psalms*, lxxvi. 5: "None of the men of might have found their hands."

424. And labour too, i.e. 'and shall labour too.'

want = be deprived of.

426. a wealthier = one wealthier, a wealthier person.

427, 428. I mean the man ... name. Mr. Robert Smith, a rich banker, afterwards (in 1796) created Lord Carrington, who, "under the strictest injunctions of secrecy," sent considerable sums on several occasions for the relief of the poor at Olney. See *Letters, To Unwin*, Jan. 19, 1783; To the same, Jan. 15, 1785; etc. Cf. also *To Unwin*, Oct. 20, 1784: "I have paid one ... compliment (in the *Task*), which was so justly due, that I did not know how to withhold it ... The compliment I mean is to Mr. Smith. It is however so managed, that nobody but himself can make the application, and you, to whom I disclose the secret; a delicacy on my part, which so much delicacy on his obliged me to the observance of." Mr. Smith "denied them nothing but his name," i.e. he was ready to give his money, but would not allow the donor's name to be revealed. Like Pope's Allen, he "did good by stealth" (*Epilogue to Satires*, i. 136).

431. sottish waste, waste caused by drunkenness; they squander their earnings on drink. See ll. 459-461 below.

432. the nightly thief. *Nightly* means here 'nocturnal'—'appearing by night,' not 'appearing every night.'

434. compensate. For the accentuation see l. 134 and note.

435. works of darkness. This Biblical phrase is used here in a double sense: (1) moral—'wicked deeds'; (2) literal—'deeds done in the dark.' Cf. *Romans*, xiii. 12: "Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness"; and *Ephesians*, v. 11: "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness."

437. Plashed, interwoven, by half-breaking the branches and entwining them with the unbroken upright branches. *Plash* is Fr. *plisser*, Lat. *plicare*, to weave, *plait*. *Pleach*, used several times by Shakespeare, is the same word.

439, 440. lame To better deeds, feeble when applied to better deeds. The man was ready to put forth all his strength in wrongdoing, but was lazy at good honest work. Cf. Milton's character of Belial, *Par. Lost*, ii. 115, 116:—

"To vice industrious, but to nobler deeds  
Timorous and slothful."

440. he bundles up the spoil, he collects the spoil (vegetables, farm produce, etc.) into a bundle. Cf. Crabbe, *The Borough*, xxii., of Peter Grimes, who at night

"Off up the hedge-row glided, on his back  
Bearing the orchard's produce in a sack  
Or farmyard load, tugg'd fiercely from the stack."

442. heaviest = 'most heavily'; an adverb.

446. **Unwrenched**, without wrenching or forcing it open.

447. **chanticleer** (Fr. *chantre clair*, clear singer) used as a proper name for the cock, is derived from a popular German epic entitled *Reinêcke Fuchs*, "Reynard the Fox."

his harem, the hens, called "his wives" below, l. 449.

449. **the princely bird, with all his wives**. Cf. Chaucer, *Cant. Tales*, 15188-91:—

"He cluketh whan he hath a corn yfound,  
And to him rennen than *his wives alle*.  
Thus real, *as a prince* is in his halle,  
Leve I this chaunteclere in his pasture."

451. **loudly wondering**, i.e. loudly expressing their wonder.

452. **Nor this**, i.e. nor does he do this.

'Twere = 'it would be.' It would be some excuse for him, if his misdoing arose from pity, etc.

453. **warp aside**. *Warp* means 'twist, pervert,' so that *aside* is redundant. Cf. Bk. v. 341-343:—

"He (the King) is ours,  
To administer, to guard, to adorn the State,  
But not to *warp* or change it."

**principle**, rule of action, conduct.

455. **destitute** agrees with *them* contained in "their" (= of them); cf. ll. 8, 42 and notes.

456, 457. **themselves ... made**. The construction is: "Themselves being made his victims, as (being) more exposed," etc. He does not hesitate to rob his own family, since they are more in his power than others.

458. **their defenceless all**. He starves his family who cannot help themselves. *All* is a noun here—"all the necessities of life."

458, 460. **thirst Of ruinous ebriety**. 'thirst connected with or springing from ruinous ebriety.' *Ebriety*, drunkenness (Lat. *ebrius*, drunken). The more usual form is *inebriety*, where *in* is an intensive prefix. See Introduction, p. xxx.

461. **imbrutes**, makes brutish. The word is from Milton, who seems to have coined it, and who uses it transitively (as here) in *Par. Lost*, ix. 166:—

"This essence to incarnate and imbrute";  
and transitively in *Comus*, 468: "(The soul) imbodyes, and imbrutes."

462. **to noose**, etc., i.e. to hang him.

463, 464. **who persecutes ... veins**, who ill-treats his own flesh and blood. *Them* = the children.

467. **this merry land.** *Merry* is the regular epithet of England in our older literature. The word is here used ironically—"this so-called merry land, though really lean," etc. Perhaps, however, *merry* sarcastically points to England's drunken joviality, accompanying its leanness and beggary.

468. **lean, impoverished.**

**every twentieth pace, etc.** You cannot walk twenty paces along the street of a town without passing a public-house.

469, 470. **whiff Of stale debauch, i.e. stale odours of beer and tobacco smoke.**

470, 471. **the styes That law has licensed, i.e. public-houses or taverns, which receive a Government license.**

471. **temperance, 'temperate persons'—abstract for concrete.**

472, 473. **clouds Of Indian fume, tobacco smoke.** By *Indian* is meant 'West Indian.' Tobacco derived its name from *Tabacco*, a province of Yucatan, where it was freely used by the Spaniards in 1520. It was introduced into England by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1586. Cowper condemned smoking; see his *Conversation*, 251-262, where he calls it

"Pernicious weed! whose scent the fair annoys,"  
and speaks of

"the riotous abuse

Thy thirst-creating steams at length produce."

(Cf. also *Letters, To Unwin*, June 8, 1783, where, after praising his friend Bull, he ends with: "But—he smokes tobacco—nothing is perfect." Elsewhere, however, he is lenient to the practice both in the case of Bull and Newton; cf. *Letters, To Bull*, June 3, 1783: "My greenhouse ... wants only the fumes of your pipe to make it perfectly delightful. Tobacco was not known in the Golden Age. So much the worse for the Golden Age." And *To Newton*, Sept. 18, 1871: "You will observe, however, for your comfort, and the honour of that same pipe, that it hardly falls within the line of my censure. You never fumigate the ladies, or force them out of company; nor do you use it as an incentive to hard drinking." Cf. also his verses *To the Rev. Wm. Bull* (June 22, 1782), and Introduction, p. xxix.

473. **guzzling deep, swallowing down large quantities of liquor.** *Deep* is an adverb here.

474. **The lackey, the footman.**

**the craftsman, the artisan or workman.** Different classes of artisans are enumerated below, *h. 476, 477.*

475. **Takes a Lethæan leave, i.e. takes a leave like that produced by the waters of Lethæ; entirely forgets it (for the time).** Lethæ (Greek *λήθη*, forgetfulness) was a river in the Greek Hades, the waters of which the dead were made to drink, that they

might forget all that had happened in their lives. Cf. Cowpers' lines on some names of little note recorded in the *Biographia Britannica*, sent to Unwin, Sept. 3, 1780 :—

“Lethean gulfs receive them as they fall,  
And dark oblivion soon absorbs them all.”

Milton (*Par. Lost*, ii. 583-586) places “Lethe, the river of oblivion,” in his hell,

“whereof who drinks,  
Forthwith his former state and being forgets,  
Forgets both joy and grief, pleasure and pain.”

And cf. Shaks. *2 Henry IV.*, v. ii. 72 :—

“May this be wash'd in Lethe, and forgotten?”

Shakspeare forms the adjective *Lethe'd*—“a Lethe'd dulness,” *Ant. and Cleo.* ii. i. 26. Milton (*Par. Lost*, ii. 604) has *Lethean*.

476. *joiner*, carpenter.

*he that plies the shears*, i.e. the tailor, as “he that kneads the dough” (l. 477) is the baker.

478. *All learn'd*. *Learn'd* is used ironically here. Drunkenness often makes men foolishly sententious and oracular. Cf. George Eliot's description of the company at the Rainbow Inn in *Silas Marner*, Chap. vi.

*The fiddle*, a musical instrument in common vogue to entertain the company at public-houses.

479. *as = as if*; see l. 300 and note. *Wept* and *wail'd* are both transitive here—“wept and wailed over.”

480. *Its wasted tones ... unheard*, i.e. the waste of its tones and the non-hearing of its harmony.

481. *she*. This anticipatory use of the pronoun gives emphasis, *she* being strongly demonstrative. Cf. “he of Gath, Goliath,” ll. 269, 270.

482-484. *Fell Discord ... scales*. The poet personifies Discord as presiding over the dispute, unsent on the sign-post of the tavern, but taking care, in her own interest, not to decide it and so bring the quarrel to an end. Cowper doubtless had in view the impending conflict between Gabriel and Satan at the close of Milton's *Par. Lost*, iv., where

“The Eternal to prevent such horrid fray  
Hung forth in Heaven his golden scales,”

and

“in these he put two weights,  
The sequel each of parting and of fight.”

Cf. also *ib.* ii. 907-909 :—

“Chaos umpire sits,  
And by decision more embroils the fray  
By which he reigns.”

484. **undecisive.** The modern form is *indecisive*: the later tendency being to use the Romance prefix (*in-*) with Romance words: as, *infrequent* rather than *unfrequent*, *immeasurable* than *unmeasurable*.

484-486. **In this she lays ... poise.** The company are in such quarrelsome mood (Discord is arbitress of the debate, l. 482), and among the disputants there is so much ignorance on the one side balanced by so much pride on the other, that there is no prospect of the quarrel being settled. *Poise*, *equipoise*, *equilibrium*.

488. **The cheek-distending oath**, a paraphrase of the common Shaksperian expression, "a good mouth-filling oath" (*1 Henry IV.*, III. i. 259). Cf. the phrases "swelling words," "to talk big," and the derivation of *bombast*.

490. **Like those which, etc.** Swearing, like drinking, was common among gentlemen and Members of Parliament ("senators") in Cowper's day. Thurlow, the Lord Chancellor and once the poet's fellow-clerk, was notorious for his powers of swearing, whence partly he got his nickname of "The Thunderer." Cf. *Expostulation*, 662-655; *Conversation*, 55-74.

492. **the schools, viz., these taverns.**

493. **arts**, such as swearing and drunkenness.

494. **some**, as the "modern senators" above; l. 490.

498, 499. **Society ... casts them out.** The community, grown weary of their crimes, refuses to be troubled with them any longer, and they are convicted and transported. Transportation for penal offences to the American plantations ceased about 1776, but in 1787 felons were, for the first time, transported to Botany Bay. In 1864 the reception of convicts was successfully refused by the Australian colonies.

500. **vain the attempt, etc.** It is useless for me to stigmatize this public nuisance of the multiplicity of public-houses, seeing that it is so advantageous to the State revenue; and hence it is not to the interest of Government to suppress them.

503. **stinks, and is of use.** Like manure, it is disgusting but profitable. The unexpected *and*, instead of *but*, adds a sarcastic force to the statement.

504. **The Excise, the tax on certain home commodities and on licenses to sell them.** Beer, etc., being liable to this tax, the greater is the consumption of beer, the larger is the revenue from the tax accruing to the Government. Cowper's argument is that the existence of the tax makes it the interest of Government to encourage intoxication; but he seems to have forgotten that since the tax increases the price of beer, it so far places a check upon drunkenness. Cf. *Letters, To Unwin*, Dec. 24, 1780:

"Government is too much interested in the consumption of malt liquor to reduce the number of venders."

In 1724 the malt tax was changed into a tax of threepence on each barrel of ale. Walpole's excise scheme, relating to tobacco and wine, was introduced, in the face of violent opposition, in 1733. The revenue from excise in 1786 was £5,540,114.

506. dribbling ... contents, i.e. continually supplying customers with beer. *Dribble*, the frequentative form of *drip* (cf. *drag*, *drabble*; *prate*, *prattle*, etc.) is transitive here.

507. the Midas finger. Midas, king of Phrygia, chose as his reward for his hospitality to Silenus, that everything he touched should be turned into gold. Finding, however, that even his food became gold, he begged Bacchus to recall the gift, and was bidden to bathe in the river Pactolus, whose sands thenceforth became golden. The line means "being taxed by the Government, and so made profitable."

508. Bleed gold ... away, produce gold for the Government to squander.

510. Gloriously drunk, in the double ironical sense of 'finely, magnificently drunk' and 'drunk in a noble cause.' Cf. Burns, of the drunken Tam o' Shanter, ll. 57, 58:—

"Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious,  
O'er all the ill of life victorious."

the important call, i.e. the summons of your country to drink.

513. fallen upon, happened upon; would that it had been my lot to live then. The expression is Miltonic; cf. *Par. Lost*, vii. 25: "though fallen on evil days."

514. those golden times, the Golden Age of artless innocence, celebrated by Hesiod, etc.

515. Arcadian scenes, scenes of pastoral simplicity and happiness. Arcadia, with its inland situation, was the pastoral province of ancient Greece, and so came to be regarded as the typical region of rustic innocence.

Maro, Vergil, who sings of rural life in his *Eclogues*.

516. Sidney, Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), who wrote *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, a pastoral romance in prose, full of rural descriptions and pure and lofty sentiment, and marked by richness of phrase and musical cadence (hence the term "poetic prose").

517. Nymphs were Dian's, young women were as chaste as Diana. Diana was the virgin goddess, the patroness of chastity. For nymphs and swains, see ll. 20, 21 and note.

518. courts, palaces, grand and fashionable society, as opposed to rural life ("the groves").

. 520-522. The footsteps ... effaced. • Cf. Vergil, *Georgics*, ii. 473; 474: *extrema ... Justitia excedens terris vestigia fecit*, 'Last of all were left the footprints of Justice, as she departed from the earth.'

524. Observed as prodigies, noticed as something strange and abnormal.

reclaimed, reformed.

525. Vain wish! etc. Cowper supposes an objection to be raised, which he replies to in l. 529.

525, 526. airy dreams Sat for the picture, the picture of innocence was sketched by the poets from an imaginary ideal and not from real life. The image is that of a person sitting to have his portrait taken. Cf. *Hope*, 7-10:—

"The poor, inured to drudgery and distress,  
Act without aim, think little, and feel less,  
And no where, but in feigned Arcadian scenes,  
Taste happiness, or know what pleasure means."

527. Imparting ... shade, giving shape and form, by his description, to an unreality. Cf. Shaks. *Mid. Night's Dream*, v. i. 14-17:—

"As imagination bodies forth  
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name."

528. Imposed ... truth, deceptively put forward a pleasant delusion in place of a reality. *Delirium* (Lat. *de*, from, and *lira*, a furrow) is lit. 'going out of the furrow in ploughing'; hence, 'wandering of the mind, hallucination.'

529. I still must envy them, etc. Though this old innocence was unreal, still it is something to have been able to imagine it; whereas in these days its existence even in the fancy is scouted as incredible.

530. favoured, was in sympathy with.

533. tramontane, strange, wild; lit. 'beyond (Lat. *trans*) the mountains.' In Italy the North wind is called *La Tramontana*, because it comes across the Alps. • Steel, in the *Taller*, has the expression "tramontane lovers," i.e. strange, fantastic. See Introduction, p. xxx.

stumbles, puzzles; it is felt to be incredible. *Stumble* is transitive here.

534. we are polished. The statement is, of course, bitterly ironical. 'Polished' was a title which the 18th century especially arrogated to itself. Cf. Percy's Preface to his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*: "In a polished age like the present I am sensible that many of these reliques of antiquity will require great allowances to be made for them."



537. dignified governs whom above.

less Than, inferior to.

539. The character, the person representing such qualities. *Character* is used here in the same sense as the "Characters" of a drama.

540-544. Her head, adorned ... it sustains. That the fashion of lofty head-dresses prevailed early in the 18th century we know from *The Spectator*, No. 98, where Addison says: "I remember several ladies who were once near seven feet high, that at present want some inches of five .... I very much admire that those female architects who raise such wonderful structures out of ribbands, lace, and wire, have not been recorded for their respective inventions." A similar fashion came in about 1772; cf. Fairholt, *Costume in England*: "The ladies decorated their heads... with a most enormous heap of hair, which was frequently surmounted by plumes of large feathers and bunches of flowers, until the head seemed to overbalance the body."

540. lappets, the lace flaps or streamers of a lady's head-dress. Cf. *Truth*, 139, of the "ancient prude," who "sails with lappet head and mincing airs."

543. Indebted to. Cf. l. 126, and *The Halibut*, 11-13:—

"Indebted to no magnet and no chart,  
Nor under guidance of the polar fire,  
Thou wast a voyager on many coasts."

545. Her elbows ruffled. Her dress had short sleeves reaching to the elbows and bending in ruffles or frills.

546. French heels, high-heeled French shoes. The heels were so high that it was difficult to walk with them ("tottering," "ill-propped"). "Her elbows ruffled" and "her form ill-propped" are absolute clauses.

547. But that the basket, etc. The fact that she carries a basket shows that she belongs to the lower orders.

548. Interprets her more truly, indicates her social position more correctly than her attire does.

550. Expect her soon, etc. If she goes on at the present rate, she will soon become too grand for work, and turn fine lady. *Footboy*, attendant to carry anything for her.

552. Her train ... care. An absolute clause; 'being' is understood after *umbrella*. Being rid of her basket, she can now devote all her attention to gathering up her train (i.e. the part of her dress that fashionably trails behind her) and to her parasol. The use of umbrellas as a protection from sun and rain seems to have been pretty much confined to women down to Cowper's time. Jonas Hanway, who died in 1786, is said to have been the first man who generally used an umbrella in the

streets of London. Cf. *Letters, To Mrs. Newton*, Aug. 1781: "Neither do I suppose the preposterous customs that prevail at present, a proof of its (the world's) greater folly. In a few years, perhaps next year, the fine gentleman will shut up his umbrella, and give it to his sister, filling his hand with a crab-tree cudgel instead of it." For *train* cf. note to l. 247.

553. **tinged**, tarnished, contaminated. •

554. **Appears a spot**, has the appearance of a spot.  
a vestal's robe. The Vestals at Rome were the virgin priestesses of the goddess Vesta, whose sacred fire they tended. They wore a white robe (*stola*) and a white linen over garment (*lauteum supernum*).

555. **The worse for what it soils**. The spot is the more obnoxious, because it defiles what was so pure before. *The* in "the worse" is the old instrumental case of *the* used as a Demonstrative, and *the worse* = 'in that degree worse.'

**The fashion**. We should now say *fashion*, without the article, as we say 'mathematics' rather than 'the mathematics.' This *the* is used with nouns denoting well-known or unique objects; cf. 'the heavens,' 'the queen.'

557. **rural manners**, manners or morals suited to the country; artless and pure.

558. **Time was** = there was a time. •

559. **watch**. The primary meaning of *to watch* is 'to remain awake,' and so 'to keep guard.'

564. **With doubtful credit**, with hesitating belief.

566. **Now, ere you sleep, etc.** A recent experience of Lady Austen's may perhaps have suggested this passage. In a letter of 1782 to Unwin, Cowper writes: "Villains were both heard and seen in the garden (of her house), and at the doors and windows. The kitchen window in particular was attempted, from which they took a complete pane of glass.... The ladies being worn out with continual watching, and repeated alarms, were at last prevailed upon to take refuge with us. Men furnished with firearms were put into the house, and the rascals, having intelligence of this circumstance, beat a retreat."

567. **polished**—and so kept in good order for use.

**primed**. To prepare for firing, the old-fashioned musket had to be "primed," which was done by putting powder in the pan of the gun. This powder was then ignited by a spark struck from a flint by the hammer of the gun. Percussion caps did not come into use till after 1820. Cf. Tennyson, *Maud*, Part I., l. 11, 12:—

"And Sleep must lie down arm'd, for the villainous centfe-bits  
 Grind on the wakeful ear in the hush of the moonless nights."

568. **drop the nightbolt,** fasten the door securely at night. *Drop* means 'let it fall into position' so as to bar the door.

569. **the first larum, etc.,** The first cock-crow may waken you to find housebreakers inside your house. *Larum* = *alarum* = *alarm*, from Fr. *alarme*, It. *all'arme*, to arms!

571. **horrid, terrifying.** This word, frequent in Milton, has become vulgarized in modern use.

573, 574. **unconscious ... Of, that had had no experience of ; unfrequented by.**

575. **bold, i.e. venturesome.**

578, 579. **The course ... fails.** For Cowper's pessimism, see Introduction, p. xviii. And cf. Milton, *Par. Lost*, xii. 105, 106 :—

"Thus will this latter, as the former world,  
Still tend from bad to worse."

And Horace, *Odes*, III. vi. 46-48 :—

*Aetas parentum, pejor avis, tulit  
Nos nequiores, mox daturos  
Progeniem vitiosiore.*

"The age of our sires was worse than that of our grandsires, and we are more wicked than our fathers, while our offspring will be yet more corrupt than ourselves." Cf. also Vergil, *Georgics*, i. 199-203 ; Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 938-941.

579. **fatal, fixed by fate, fated.**

580. **Increase of power ... wealth.** The power of Great Britain had been rapidly extending at this period. In 1757 the victory of Plassey secured Bengal ; in 1759 the capture of Quebec ensured the conquest of Canada ; and in 1764 the victory of Buxar made England the leading power in India. Returned officers of the East India Company or "nabobs" as they were called, were notorious at this time for their wealth and luxury. See Introduction, p. xiii.

581. **excess, intemperance, sensual indulgence.**

582. **the scrofulous and itchy plague.** Excess is "scrofulous," because it taints, in its progress, the whole body politic, as scrofula does the human body ; and it is "itchy," because its victims are troubled with a continual, unsatisfied desire for pleasure.

584. **contagious** agrees with *excess*.

585, 586. **the graduated scale Of order,** the successive ranks of the social scale ; the different classes of society.

586! **from the chariot to the plough, i.e. from people of high position to the labouring classes.** A similar expression is 'From the palace to the cottage.' The *chariot*, a light kind of coach, common in Cowper's day, has been since superseded by the brougham. See *Tirocinium*, 748, quoted on p. 39.

587. an arm, i.e. power. Cowper<sup>9</sup> is alluding to the non-resident gentry, who, instead of living on their estates in the country and exercising their magisterial functions, spend their time and money on the gaieties of London life. The country districts thus become a prey to robbers and housebreakers.

593. Authority, i.e. persons in authority—abstract for concrete. Country magistrates, when resident on their estates, are often sluggish and indifferent.

595. convivial fond of good dinners. The clergyman was generally, and is still sometimes, a member of the local bench of magistrates. "Bears the ... sword in vain" is a Biblical phrase; cf. *Romans*, xiii. 4: "If thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he (the ruler) beareth not the sword in vain." *The sword* = authority.

597. His reverence and his worship, his clerical and his magisterial functions. He is too lazy to do his duty either as a pastor or as a magistrate. The title 'your reverence' is used in addressing a clergyman; 'your worship,' in addressing a magistrate.

599-602. Perhaps timidity ... bind. Cf. *Table Talk*, 311-313:—

"Let Magistrates alert perform their parts,  
Not skulk, or put on a prudential mask,  
As if their duty were a desperate task;"—

a passage alluding to the leniency of the magistrates in the trials connected with the Gordon riots of 1780—a leniency which was generally censured as proceeding from pusillanimity. Cf. *Letters, To Unwin*, Feb. 6, 1781 (on Lord George Gordon's trial and acquittal): "Let us know on what point his acquittal turned, for at present I am rather at a loss to conceive how he could escape if the law was allowed to take its course, *uninterrupted by fear* and uncontrolled by a spirit of party." See Introduction, pp. xv., xxi.

601. the band, the gang of criminals.

602. convict, used here for 'guilty person,' whom the magistrate is afraid to convict.

audacious, because he sets justice and the law at defiance.

603. by profession ghostly pure, pure by spiritual profession, i.e. reputed as pure and upright in virtue of the sacred office that he holds. In the Bible "Holy Ghost" = "Holy Spirit," and in our older literature we have "*ghostly* father," for "spiritual father" or "priest." Cf. Bk. ii. 556, "*ghostly counsel*," and *Terminium*, 420-422:—

"Behold your Bishop! well he plays his part,  
Christian in name, and infidel at heart,  
*Ghostly in office, earthly in his plan.*"

604. **his vice**, corrupt motives. Bribery and corruption were shamefully common in Cowper's day, and majorities were unblushingly purchased in Parliament, where "every man had his price." Cf. Bk. iii. 795; 796, of the spendthrift who enters Parliament to recoup his losses:—

" Ministerial grace  
Deals him out money from the public chest,"  
and *Table Talk*, 416, 417:—

" When infamous Venality, grown bold,  
Writes on his bosom, 'To be let or sold.' "

The vice extended to all classes, and Cowper here charges even clergymen, as magistrates, with accepting bribes to pervert justice. See Introduction, p. xvi.

**Prove** = show himself.

605. **dainty** (from Lat. *dens, dentis*, a tooth) = (1) toothsome, delicious, (2) delicate, (3) scrupulous, particular (as here). For *outside*, cf. Shaks. *Merchant of Venice*, I. iii. 103:—

" O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath ! "

607. **His milk-white hand**, the hand of this elegant and refined gentleman—said ironically. Cowper satirizes the clerical coxcomb in Bk. ii. 414-439, where he refers to "the diamond on his lily hand." Cf. also Tenyson, *Maud*, Part I., viii. 9-11:—

" I heard no longer  
The snowy-banded, dilettante,  
*Delicate-handed* priest intone."

" **the palm is hardly clean**, there is the taint of bribery on his hand. Cf. Bk. ii. 372, 373:—

" I venerate the (clergy) man whose heart is warm,  
Whose hands are pure " ;  
and Shaks. *Julius Cæsar*, IV. iii. 9-11:—

" Let me tell you, Cassius, you yourself  
Are much condemn'd to have an *itching palm* ;  
' To sell and mart your offices for gold  
' To undeservers " ;

and *ib.* 23, 24:—

" Shall we now  
*Contaminate our fingers* with base bribes ? "

608. **But here and there**, etc. In this passage the best reading places no stop after "clean" in l. 607. *But* is thus a subordinate conjunction, and the construction is: "The palm is hardly clean without an ugly smutch appearing here and there"; or "The palm is hardly so clean that an ugly smutch does not appear," etc. Cf. "it never rains but it pours" = it never rains without pouring. If a comma or a dash is placed after "clean,"

*but* will be a co-ordinative conjunction. *Smutch* and *smut* are cognate with the German *schmutz*, dirt.

609. *Foh*, or *faugh*, is an exclamation of disgust. It expresses the sound made by expelling air from the lips when the nose is stopped at an unpleasant smell. Cf. *fie*.

that left it, *i.e.* that caused the smutch.

610. *Whoso seeks an audit*, etc. Whoever wishes for a favourable audience with our clerical magistrate, brings the present that is expected of him ("his tribute"), and so gains his object. *Audit* now means 'the formal settling of accounts.'

612. *speeds* = succeeds; the verb is intransitive here.

614. *A noble cause*, *i.e.* patriotism. *Cause* is correlated to *effect* in l. 616. The love of our country and the determination to defend her has produced the militia system, and that again has produced the lawless and dissipated habits that mark the lower ranks of the people.

617. *universal soldiership*, service in the militia. In 1757, through dread of a French invasion, the militia was reorganized by Pitt under an Act of Parliament, 30 George II. The militia, as opposed to the regular army, is a standing national force liable only to home service.

617, 618. *stabbed The heart of merit*, given a death-blow to goodness; been fatal to it.

619. *Arms*, *i.e.* the profession of arms, military service.

*brainless rage*, wild recklessness. The ill effects of military service are due to the bad characteristics of soldiers.

620. *in whatever cause*, *i.e.* however good the cause may be, it makes no difference.

623. *The clown*, 'the rustic'; from Lat. *colonus*, a tiller of the soil.

*the child of nature*, *i.e.* untainted by the artificialities of city life; simple and unsophisticated. This is somewhat of a fancy picture.

627. *Is balloted*, has his number drawn in the balloting for enlistment in the militia. The practice was discontinued in 1830. *Ballot* = a little ball, used in voting or in drawing lots.

628. *doffs his hat*, takes off his hat. *Doff* = 'do off', as *don* = 'do (or put) on.' Older writers use *dup* = 'do (or put) up', *i.e.* open; and *dout* = 'do (or put) out'. Cf. Shaks. *Hamlet*, iv. v. 52, 53:—

"Then up he rose, and down'd his clothes,  
And dupp'd the chamber door."

629. *A Bible-oath*. The recruit, with bared head, mumblingly repeats the words of the oath, taken by kissing the Bible, to

serve his king and country; though he hardly knows what he is doing.

630. The task performed, an absolute clause.

631. the serjeant, or *sergeant*, the officer whose duty it is to instruct him in his drill. *Sergeant* is a doublet of *servant*

632. his torment.<sup>o</sup> Because he is plagued by the recruit's stupidity.

633. introverted, turned inwards. The recruit is taught to turn his toes outwards.

634. dejected looks, downward gaze. *Dejected* here means literally 'downcast.' He is taught to hold his head up; cf. "he stands erect," below, l. 639.

636. Unapt to learn, i.e. 'being' or 'since he is unapt,' etc.

637. by slow degrees. The repetition of the phrase is emphatic.

puts off himself, gets rid of his former self; becomes a new man.

639. his slouch, the "awkward gait" of l. 633.

640. right onward, straight forward. Cf. Milton, *Sonnet upon his Blindness*, S., 9: "(I) still bear up, and steer Right onward." air, bearing.

641. above, i.e. as regards his head.

642. meal and larded locks. The hair was well greased and then sprinkled with meal or hair-powder. The use of hair-powder was compulsory in the British army when Cowper wrote, but was abolished sixteen years later.

643. with a grace, with a jaunty air.

644. his three years ... expired, an absolute clause; *expired* = 'having expired.' *Her ship* is ironical for 'service in the militia,' which lasted three years.

646. He hates, etc. The discharged soldier misses the military band of music which used to accompany his marches.

647. drives his cattle to a march. As he drives his cattle, he imagines himself to be marching to the music of the band. *March* is a piece of music played for soldiers to march to. For this *to*, see l. 27 and note.

649. 'Twere = it would be.

his exterior changes. See l. 638.

were all, summed up everything; were all that had happened to him.

650. clumsy port, opposed to the "martial air" of l. 640.

652. game, i.e. gamble.

653. **Sabbath breach**, breaking the Sabbath; i.e. breaking or transgressing the fourth (Jewish) Commandment, which enjoins rest from secular occupations on the Sabbath day. *Sabbath* (from a Hebrew word meaning 'rest') = Sunday. Cowper in one of his *Letters* (*To Junwin*, March 28, 1780) gives his views on Sabbath-keeping: "The Sabbath then, I think, may be considered, first, as a commandment, no less binding upon modern Christians than upon ancient Jews," etc. And cf. *To Newton*, May 31, 1783: "The Sabbath is almost as obsolete in England as in France. I feel something like indignation kindle within me, when the papers tell me that our dukes and our judges ... profane it, and in a manner the most notorious."

654. **The great proficiency**, etc., how much he has improved — said, of course, ironically.

abroad, away from his home, at his barracks.

659. **Man in society**, 'man *naturally* mixing with his fellow men in social intercourse,' as opposed to 'man *artificially* associated (l. 663) in public Companies,' etc.

660 **Blown**, i.e. that has blown or blossomed. See note to l. 302.

'tis there alone, etc. Cf. Bk. i. 678-680;—

"True worth and virtue in the mild  
And genial soil of cultivated life  
Thrive most";

also *ib.* 592-607, and *Alexander Selkirk*, 15, 18:—

"Society, Friendship, and Love  
Divinely bestowed upon man," etc.

663-666. The three categories mentioned in these lines are represented respectively by (1) Chartered Boroughs (ll. 671-675); (2) Commercial Companies (ll. 676-683); (3) the Army (ll. 684-690).

664. **regal warrant**, royal charter; see note to l. 671 below.

664. 665. **by bond For interest sake, by mutual agreement, to promote his own interests**—as in the case of a public Company. In "for interest sake" *interest* is in the possessive case. For ease of pronunciation the *s* of the possessive was, and is, often omitted before the word *sake* (and other words beginning with a sibilant), as in 'for mercy' sake. Sometimes the apostrophe also was dropped, as here, and in "for his Maker's image sake" (*Milton, Par. Lost*, xi. 514), "for safety sake" (*Shaks. 1 Henry IV.*, v. i. 65). Cowper writes "for good example sake" (*Hope*, 249), and "for conversation sake" (*ib.* 436); but, "for his subject's sake" (*Charity*, 636).

665. **swarming into clans**, gathering together into organized bodies.



669. **Fades.** As flowers, when gathered and closely packed into vases, soon fade, so men, when artificially united, soon become demoralized.

671. **chartered boroughs.** The English boroughs at the beginning of the 13th century had grown rich enough to buy liberty from the Crown, and up to the reign of Henry VI. all freemen settling in a borough and paying their dues became *ipso facto* burglers or burgesses. Then a change occurred, and the existing burgesses, with the view of securing to themselves the civic property they had acquired, procured charters of incorporation from the Crown, which turned them into a close body. Meanwhile also the internal government of the boroughs had almost universally passed into the hands of Common Councils; and to these councils clauses in the new charters generally confined the right of choosing their representatives in Parliament. It was with this restriction that the long process of degradation began which ended in reducing the representation of English boroughs to a mere mockery. All manner of corrupt influences were easily brought to bear upon the small body of corporators; and down to the days of Pitt the voice of the people had to be looked for, not in the members for the boroughs, but in the county representatives. (See Green's *History of the English People*, Vol. ii., pp. 21, 22).

673. **their private functions,** their domestic and social relations.

674. **Become a loathsome body.** See note to l. 671 above. For the general sentiment compare Southey, *Colloquies on Society*, Vol. ii., p. 193: "There is no corporate conscience. Men who act in bodies, it matters not whether large or small, mobs, senates, or cabinets, will without hesitation take their share in measures which, if proposed to any one of them as an individual, would make him reply with the Syrian,—Am I a dog that I should do this thing?" Similarly, Sydney Smith compared the Members of a Board to different kinds of wine—which, when taken separately, are pleasant drinking; but which, if combined, form a nauseous mixture.

675. **hurtful to the main,** to the main or chief part, the general body of the nation. So in Milton, *Par. Lost*, vi. 698, the War in Heaven is described as "dangerous to the main." Cf. the phrase 'in the main' = for the most part.

676, 677. **unimpeachable** ... life, who cannot be accused of being wanting in kindness and affection towards their families and friends. For *charities*, cf. Bk. v. 506-508:—

"Can he be strenuous in his country's cause,  
Who slights the charities for whose dear sake  
That country, if at all, must be beloved?"

- And Milton, *Par. Lost*, iv. 756, 757, where by marriage

"Relations dear, and all the charities

Of father, son, and brother first were known."

Also Cicero, *De Officiis*, i. 17: *omnes omnium caritates patria una complexa est*, "the fatherland combines and unites all the charities (or affectionate feelings) of all."

678. **Incorporated**, i.e. when they (the merchants) are incorporated or formed into companies.

680. **common rights**, rights common to all, belonging equally to all.

681. **Build factories with blood**, etc. The allusion is to the East India Company, which in 1612 established its first factory, or house of business for its agents, at Surat. In 1640 it began to trade in Bengal, and built a factory at Hoogly, near Calcutta. Cowper charges the Company with promoting its business operations by making war upon the Native rulers. See note to l. 30, and cf. *Letters, To Unwin*, Jan. 3, 1784, where he calls the East India Company "a corporation of plunderers." Also *To Lady Hesketh*, Feb. 16, 1788: "If these men have, as they are charged, rioted in the miseries of the innocent, and dealt death to the guiltless with an unsparing hand," etc. On Cowper's view of Indian affairs see Introduction, pp. xii.-xv.

684. **the field of glory**, the field of battle in which glory is won; i.e. war or the military profession.

685. **dazzled ... array**. The outward splendour of war misleads men into thinking it glorious. *Dazzled agrees with world*.

686. **With all its majesty**, etc. Cf. Shaks. *Othello*, III. iii. 351-354:—

"The shrill trumpet,  
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,  
The royal banner, and all quality,  
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!"

687. **immortal wreaths**, i.e. undying renown, of which the "wreath" is a symbol.

689. **On principle**, i.e. as part of a regular system. Seriousness of purpose was discouraged in soldiers as being not conducive to soldiership.

689, 690. **foppery atones for folly**, i.e. so long as the soldier has a smart appearance, it does not matter how foolish and frivolous he is. Cf. ll. 641-643 above.

690. **gallantry for every vice**, so long as he is brave, he may be as vicious as you please. Cf. *Hope*, 209:—

"A soldier may be anything, if brave,"

and *ib.*, 405:—

"A soldier's best is courage in the field," etc.

*Gallant* has come to be applied as a kind of official epithet to military men.

691, 692. **by the great Abandoned.** Cf. ll. 587-590.

692. **which ... regret, i.e.** a thing which I still more regret, viz. its being infected, etc.

693. **Infected, contaminated.** Cf. the words *contagious* and *taints* above, ll. 584, 585.

**the manners and the modes, the morals and the fashions.**

694. **wins, attracts.** Cf. the adjectives *winning* and *winsome*. For Cowper's love of the country, cf. *Letters, To Unwin*, Nov. 10, 1788: "Everything I see in the fields is to me an object, and I can look at the same rivulet, or at a handsome tree, every day of my life, with new pleasure. This indeed is partly the effect of a natural taste for rural beauty, and partly the effect of habit; for I never in all my life have let slip the opportunity of breathing fresh air, and of conversing with nature, when I could fairly catch it"; and see Introduction, pp. xxi., xxii.

695-697. **I never framed ... scene.** So Goldsmith, *Deserted Village*, 83-86:—

"In all my wanderings round this world of care,  
In all my griefs—and God has given my share—  
I still had hopes, my latest hours to crown,  
Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down."

697. **There early strayed, etc.** In early youth my thoughts and desires were drawn towards a country life, before I was free to choose my career, which indeed was already marked out for me (hence, he had not "the hope of being free" to choose). Cowper alludes to the time when he was a school-boy at Westminster. His father decided upon the legal profession for him, and before he left school his name was entered at the Middle Temple.

699. **Had found me, had come to me** in the course of events.

700, 701. **rural too ... muse.** Cowper's earliest extant verses are the love-poems to Delia, his cousin Theodora Cowper, to whom he was much attached; so that these rural efforts have not been preserved. Cf. *Letters, To Unwin*, 1786: "You, I think, was never a dabbler in rhyme. I have been one ever since I was fourteen years of age, when I began with translating an elegy of Tibullus."

702, **jingling her poetic bells, i.e.** writing verses of little poetical merit. He pictured his youthful muse in the guise of a fool or jester wearing the cap and bells (i.e. *cap* with bells attached to it).

703. **Ere yet ... powers, before** my poetic faculty was matured.

704. **but whose, but one whose.**

705. **Nature's praises**, praises of country life and rural scenes.

706, 707. **the pipe Of Tityrus**, i.e. poetry which has Nature and the country for its theme. Tityrus is the name of the piping swain in Vergil's first Eclogue, which commences with the line, *Tityre, tu recubans patula sub tegmine fagi*, "Tityrus, thou that reclinest beneath the shade of the spreading beech-tree."

709. **Then Milton**, etc. Cowper was a great admirer of Milton, and there are many reminiscences of his style and manner in the *Task* (see notes to ll. 104, 252, 439, 461, 482, 513, 640, 675, 676). In 1791 he undertook an edition of Milton, and translated his Latin and Italian poems, but annotated only two books of the *Paradise Lost*. Cf. *Letters*, *To Hayley*, Feb. 24, 1793: "I spoke of his *Paradise Lost*, .. and told him (the Milton of his dream) a long story of the manner in which it affected me, when I first discovered it, being at that time a schoolboy." And *To Unwin*, Jan. 17, 1782: "You did not mention Milton's *Allegro* and *Penseroso*, which I remember being so charmed with when I was a boy that I was never weary of them." And *To the same*, Oct. 31, 1779: "Was there ever anything so delightful as the music of the *Paradise Lost*? It is like that of a fine organ; has the fullest and the deepest tones of majesty, with all the softness and elegance of the Dorian flute: variety without end, and never equalled, unless perhaps by Virgil." It is perhaps worth noticing, in this connexion, that in Cowper's few Early Poems the expression "pernicious height," obviously borrowed from Milton (*Par. Lost*, i. 282), occurs twice. See Introduction, p. xxxii.

710. **his Paradise** is, of course, his *Paradise Lost*, with perhaps also the *Paradise Regained*.

715. **Engaged Iron**, attracted.

718. **enamoured of the life I loved**, etc. Cowper says that Cowley, like himself, loved a country life, which he at last attained in his retirement at Chertsey (see note to ll. 727, 728 below). His "Essays," especially the 11th, "Of Myself," express a touching and unaffected yearning after solitude in nature and sing the praises of rural ease and seclusion.

723. **Ingenious Cowley**. Cowley's "ingenuity" mainly consisted in a mixture of tortured thought and expression, learned metaphor strained to excess, far-fetched wit, and fantastical language. In his poems intellect and fancy, often degenerating into fantasy, take the place of sentiment and passion. Natural feeling is lost in the pursuit of intellectual ingenuity or learned and recondite imagery. Hence in l. 726 below, Cowper laments that his fine genius ("splendid wit") was caught and cramped by the subtleties of learned coteries ("entangled in the cobwebs of the schools").

724. **By modern lights.** Cowper probably alludes especially to Dr. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, published in 1779, in which Cowley's poetical style and method were condemned and stigmatized as "metaphysical" i.e. full of conceits. There are several references to the "Lives" in Cowper's *Letters* (cf. *To Unwin*, Jan. 5, 1782, and March 21, 1784, and Feb. 29, 1784, quoted in note to l. 34).

727, 728. **courtly & bowers.** Abraham Cowley (born 1618, died 1766) was a staunch adherent of Charles I., whose queen he accompanied to France after the battle of Naseby. At the Restoration he obtained the lease of a farm at Chertsey, on the borders of Windsor Forest, where "in his last seven or eight years he was concealed in his beloved obscurity, and possessed that solitude which from his very childhood he had always most passionately desired" (Sprat's *Life of Cowley*). "Courtly" refers to Cowley's royalist sympathies.

730. **For a lost world,** for leaving society and the Court.

**verse.** Cf. Pope, *Windsor Forest*, 372 :—

"There the last numbers flow'd from Cowley's tongue."

734. **throughout,** in the whole course of his proceedings.

735-738. **Discriminated ... points.** God has made human beings distinct from one another by the introduction of different shades of character, etc., so ingeniously varied that no two individuals are ever exactly alike.

735, 736. **strokes And touches of his hand.** The image in Cowper's mind seems to be that of the potter fashioning a clay vessel by deft manipulation. The image is a Biblical one; see *Isaiah* lxiv. 8: "O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou the potter; and we are all the work of thy hands." Cf. also *Romans*, ix. 20, 21.

738. **obtains,** holds good. Similarly we have the phrase "The report obtains," i.e. is prevalent, 'holds the field' (Lat. *obtinere*, to hold against obstacles, to keep possession of).

740. **taste,** appreciate.

**formed,** i.e. by culture.

741. "Can taste them" is understood between "tutored" and "with a relish."

**Exact** = true, proficient.

743. **It,** i.e. the love of Nature (see l. 731).

748. **villas,** country-house(s), in the suburban districts of London.

749. **Like a swarth Indian,** etc. Smoky London is the (American) Indian, and the fair villas that surround her are the beads. *Swarth* or *swart* is a form of the commoner *swarthy*.

750-752. A breath ... frame. Cf. Milton, *Par. Lost*, ix. 445  
 et seq. :—

"As one who long in populous city pent,  
 Where houses thick and sew'ls annoy the air,  
 Forth issuing on a summer's morn to breathe  
 Among the pleasant villages and farms  
 Adjoin'd, from each thing met conceives delight," etc.

750. **unadulterate**, unadulterated, pure. Cf. Shakspeare, *Henry V.*, I. ii. 16: "titles *miscreant*" (for *miscreated*); and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, v. i. 412: "the issue there *create*" (for *created*).

753. **bosom**, interior, recesses.

755. **the rich possessor**, the possessor who is rich in having a garden at all in such a crowded neighbourhood.

756. **mournful mint**. The epithet "mournful" alludes to the sober green of the plant, or rather perhaps to its faded, woe-begone aspect as grown in a city garden (cf. "sickly samples," l. 761).

757. **nightshade, or valerian**. These, along with mint, are plants that will grow with a small allowance of sun and air.

**the well**. Boldly descriptive of the small, dark garden surrounded by high walls.

758. **serve him**, supply him.

760. **livery**, garb; lit. the dress *delivered* to and worn by servants. Cf. Milton, *Par. Lost*, iv. 599: twilight's "sober livery."

761. **Though sickly samples, etc.**, i.e. though these plants are only poor and feeble specimens of the rich abundance of Nature

762-765. **the casements ... darling**. The reference is to the "window gardens" or rows of pots of plants and flowers that adorn the window-sills of rich and poor alike in towns; a *casement* or window that opens on hinges is appropriate to a cottage; a *sash* or window-frame that slides up and down is found in houses of the better class. *Case* and *sash* are, however, doublets, both being ultimately derived from Lat. *capsa*, a receptacle (here for glass), from *capio*, I take.

765. **The Frenchman's darling**, i.e. *mignonette*, which means in French "little darling." It bears sweet-scented flowers (hence called "the fragrant weed," l. 764).

767, 768. **thirst Of rural scenes**. We should now say, "thirst for rural scenes." In our older literature *of* had a much more general use than it now has. Thus Shakspeare has *of* (= for) in "I humbly do desire your grace of pardon" (*Merchant of Venice*, iv. i. 402), "I have no mind of feasting" (*ib.* II. v. 37), "I will hope of better deeds" (*Ant. and Cleopatra*, I. i. 62). We still

say both 'the hope of' and 'the hope for'; 'the desire of' and 'the desire for.'

768. **compensating.** For the accentuation, see note to l. 134.

769. **supplemental shifts, contrivances** (such as these "window gardens") to supply the want. *Supplementary* is the commoner form. See Introduction, p. xxx.

**the best he may** = the best shifts that he may (*i.e.* can) compensate his loss by. *May* originally meant 'to be able'; *cf.* *might* = ability.

770. **The most unfurnished**, *i.e.* these who are most unfurnished; as *the rich* = 'those who are rich.' *Cf.* l. 209. The whole line is a periphrasis for 'the poorest people.'

773. **burning instinct.** *Cf.* l. 743 above, where it is called "a flame," and l. 778 below, "with what ardour."

774. **crazy, rickety, ready to fall to pieces.** The word is often applied to the intellect in the sense of 'insane.' The boxes, filled with mould in which plants are grown, are hung from the wall of the room above the window.

775, 776. **There the pitcher ... teapot there.** A broken pitcher or teapot are carefully utilised as receptacles for plants or flowers.

777. **close-pent.** *Cf.* l. 766, "immured in cities."

**regrets** = regrets the loss of; misses. It represents the Latin *desidero*.

779. **when he can no more** = when he has no further ability or means in his power. *Can* originally meant 'to know,' and so 'to know how to,' and hence, 'to be able to.' For this absolute use, *cf.* Shaks. *King Lear*, IV. iv. 8:—

"What can man's wisdom  
In the restoring his bereaved sense?"

784. **Address himself who will**, *i.e.* let him, who will, address (or apply) himself.

787. **Thwart his attempts.** Like the demagogue, ll. 61, 62. *Thwart*, cross, defeat.

788. **will have**, must have; require, demand.

790. **The virtue**, the good quality.

791, 792. **That lifts him ... ordained to fill**, that equips him for the duties of life generally, and fits him for that special department of life which Providence meant him to occupy. Thus, "to the deliverer," etc.

793. **To the deliverer**, etc. Cowper doubtless had in his mind the elder Pitt, who was his political, as Wolfe was his military hero. See Bk. ii. 235-251.

799. the low vale of life, a humble and retired position. Cf. Gray, *Elegy*, 75, 76:—

“Along the cool sequestered vale of life

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.”

And *Letters, To Newton*, July 27, 1783: “My passion for retirement is not at all abated, after for so many years spent in the most sequestered state, but rather increased.” See Introduction, p. xxvi.



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